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SALAR
DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

روزنامہ ساہ بنگلور

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₹3.71 lakh cr BUDGET OUTLAY | **K'TAKA ECONOMY TO GROW AT 6.6% IN 2025** | **IT IS A REVENUE DEFICIT BUDGET (INCOME<REVENUE)** | **₹1,20,373** WELFARE PROGRAMMES | **₹86,423cr** WOMEN BASED SCHEMES | **₹54,617cr** CHILDREN BASED SCHEMES | **CM PRESENTED HIS 15TH BUDGET AS FINANCE MINISTER**

CM boasts of guarantees, makes more promises

The Budget is farmer friendly, gives a boost to education & tourism

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

With the Lok Sabha polls round the corner, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, presenting the State Budget on Friday. He strongly defended his government's guarantee schemes, asserting that they are not an "election gimmick", and flayed the central government for its "anti people" decisions.

In his record 15th budget speech as finance minister and second under the present Congress regime, Siddaramaiah proposed to revise the tax slabs for Indian Made Liquor (IML) and beer, in order to rationalise them and make them competitive with similar products of neighbouring states.

Siddaramaiah said though he has presented a revenue deficit budget (with deficit pegged at Rs 27,354 cr), he has increased the budgetary allocation for welfare programmes to Rs 1,20,373 Cr.

"Further I have successfully ensured fiscal consolidation by keeping the fiscal deficit within 3 per cent of GSDP and total outstanding liabilities within 25 per cent of GSDP," he said, as he also expressed confidence in achieving revenue surplus after the next two years.

> It is estimated that during the six-year period of the 15th Finance Commission, the loss to the state under devolution of central taxes is estimated to be ₹62,098 crore.
>
> Siddaramaiah, Chief Minister

The Budget presentation was interrupted by sloganeering and a walkout by members of the Opposition, as Siddaramaiah came down heavily on the BJP government at the Centre.

Claiming that his government is marching ahead towards setting a new example of 'Karnataka Model of Development' founded on the principles of justice, equality and fraternity enshrined in our Constitution, he said, the "anti-people decisions" of the Central government for the last 10 years has led to alarming developments such as widening inequality, concentration of wealth in a few hands and crony capitalism. These schemes are earnest efforts to create jobs and enhance purchasing power of the people, he further said, adding that they are aimed at creating a just and fair society by redistribution of wealth.

He said the government has decided to waive interest on medium and long-term overdue loans of District Cooperative Central and Primary Cooperative Agriculture and Rural Development banks, stating that it would benefit more than 57,000 farmers.

Asserting his government's commitment to implement various irrigation and drinking water projects related to inter-state rivers, including Mekedatu over Cauvery, he detailed clearances and approvals pending with the central government. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 2 & 3

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah during Budget session at Vidhana Soudha, in Bengaluru, Friday **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

BIG ANNOUNCEMENTS

Shops and establishments to be open till 1 am

₹539cr for revival of lakes in State under Amruth 2.0

Anna-Suvidha, an app to deliver foodgrains for free to senior citizens above 80 years

₹1000 month incentive for caretakers of Cerebral Palsy, Parkinsons patients

All excise department services will be digitised

Gratuity benefits for anganwadis

3 lakh houses to be built

Liquor to get pricier

₹400cr for medical colleges and ₹130 cr for super-specialty hospitals

Platform-Based Gig Workers Fund and Welfare Fee Bill will be introduced

State-level Olympics and a mini Olympics for athletes below age of 14 every year

16 millet varieties will be available at affordable rates under 'Namma Millet'

₹100cr high-security prison to come up in Shivamogga

24,005 pourakarmikas to be regularised

Peripheral Ring Road in Mysuru

₹5000cr to provide drinking water to 12 lakh households

Economic corridors from Mangaluru port to Bengaluru and Bidar to Bengaluru

2,000 government primary schools will be upgraded as bilingual schools

Minorities in spotlight ahead of polls

- ₹200 cr for development of Christian community
- ₹100 cr to develop Wakf properties across State
- ₹100 cr for the development of Anjanadri hill, the birthplace of Lord Hanuman
- ₹50 cr for development of Jain pilgrimage destinations
- ₹20 cr for basic facilities at major pilgrimage sites
- ₹10 cr for construction of Mangaluru Hajj Bhavan
- ₹2 cr for schemes aimed at empowerment of Sikligars
- ₹1 cr for Shri Nanak Jhira Saheb Gurudwara in Bidar
- Tripitakas, Buddhists' sacred texts, will be translated into Kannada

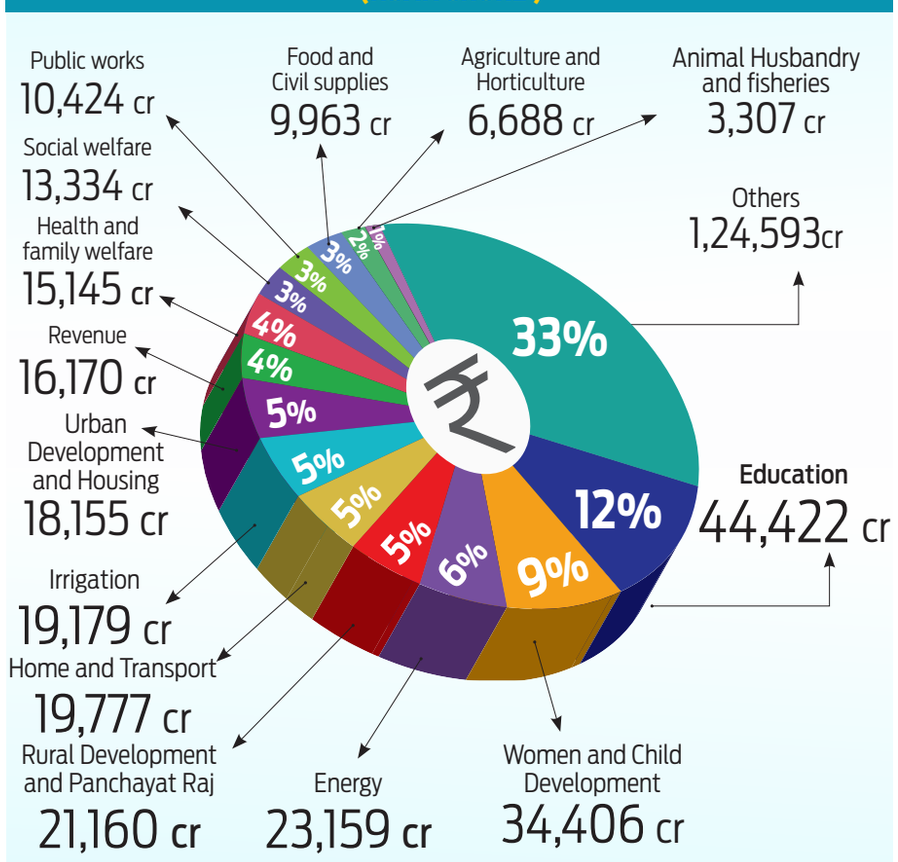
'5 guarantees for welfare'

- State allots ₹52,000 for Shakti, Gruha Jyoti, Gruha Lakshmi, Yuva Nidhi and Anna Bhagya
- ₹50,000 to ₹55,000 sent to each family every year via 'guarantees'

CM attacks Centre over funds

Noting that Karnataka is the 2nd-highest source of GST with 18% rise, CM said that a loss of ₹59,274 crore was incurred by the State due to unscientific implementation of GST in the last seven years by the Centre.

SECTOR WISE ALLOCATION
(RS. IN CRORE)



FOR FARMERS

1. Raitha Samruddhi Yojana scheme launched for farmers' stable income. It consolidates previous pro-famers schemes
2. Govt also urged the Centre to announce MSP for important crops such as arecanut, onion, grapes, mango, banana and other horticultural crops and to fix MSP based on the formula of cost of cultivation plus 50%profit as per the report by Swaminathan panel

SMOOTHER TRAFFIC FOR B'LURU

- Tunnel road in Hebbal junction to ease traffic
- Installation of Area Traffic Signal Control System in 28 junctions
- BMTC to get 1,334 electric buses and 820 BS VI diesel buses
- Peripheral Ring Road to be developed as Bengaluru Business Corridor at ₹27,000 cr
- White-topping of major roads of 147 km length at ₹1,700 cr to be completed before December 2025
- 250m tall sky deck for tourist attraction in Bengaluru
- ₹200 cr given to drinking water for 110 villages under BBMP

Focus on Namma Metro

- ₹15,611 cr for Namma Metro Phase-3
- By March 2025, 44km of Metro line will be added to existing 74 km
- New Metro line from Sarjapur to Mekhri Circle will come up under Phase-3A.
- Feasibility report to extend Metro to Tumakuru from BIEC and to Devanahalli from KIAL.
- Metro for the 1st time has become profitable

Elderly farmer dies of heart attack at Shambhu border

AMBALA, 16 FEB

A 63-year-old farmer, who was among the farmers protesting at Shambhu border near Haryana's Ambala, died of a heart attack on Friday, officials said. Gian Singh complained of chest pain in the morning and was taken to Civil Hospital in Punjab's Rajpura. From there, he was rushed to Rajindra Hospital in Patiala, where doctors declared him brought dead. Singh, who hailed from Punjab's Gurdaspur district had come to the Shambhu border two days ago to participate in the farmers' 'Delhi Chalo' march aimed at pressing Government to accept their demands, including a legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP) for crops. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 5

IT dept freezes Cong's accounts

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Congress on Friday said Income Tax authorities had frozen its main bank accounts, impacting all Congress' main bank accounts were frozen on Friday over an income tax demand of Rs 210 crore but an I-T appellate tribunal later allowed it to operate them pending a further hearing next week, a huge relief for the party which said the move had impacted all political activity.

Congress treasurer Ajay Maken, who had earlier addressed a press conference to announce that Income Tax authorities had frozen its accounts, said the tribunal has put a lien of Rs 115 crore on its accounts and the party has been allowed to spend over and above that.

Several party leaders, including party President Mallikarjun Kharge and former party chief Rahul Gandhi, expressed their outrage and alleged that the government's move was an attack on democracy.

The accounts, including that of the Indian Youth Congress, were frozen on an Income Tax demand of a total Rs 210 crore for 2018-19, an election year, Congress leader Pawan Khera said.

Congress treasurer said the party filed its Income Tax returns for the concerned year a few days late and that is why this action. —*PTI*

FIERCEST FOE OF PUTIN

Russian Oppn leader Alexei Navalny dies in jail

MOSCOW, 16 FEB

Alexei Navalny, 47, the fiercest foe of Russian President Vladimir Putin who crusaded against official corruption and staged massive anti-Kremlin protests, died in prison Friday, Russian authorities said.

Navalny, who was serving a 19-year sentence on charges of extremism, felt unwell after a walk, according to the Federal Penitentiary Service, and lost consciousness. An ambulance arrived to try to revive him, but he died. It said the cause of death was "being established."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Putin was informed of Navalny's death and the prison service would look into it in line with standard procedures. Navalny's spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh said on X, that the politician's team had no confirmation of his death so far and that his lawyer was travelling to the town where he was held. Navalny had been behind bars since January 2021. Before his arrest, he campaigned against official corruption, organised major anti-Kremlin protests and ran for public office. He had since received three prison sentences, all of which he rejected as politically motivated. Shortly after Navalny's death was reported, the Russian SOTA social media channel shared images of the Opposition politician reportedly in court yesterday.

Alexei Navalny **PHOTO: PTI**

Navalny was moved from a Russian prison in December to a "special regime" penal colony the highest security level of prisons in the country above the Artic Circle.

His investigations resonated with younger Russians via YouTube videos and posts on his website. —*AP*

K'taka Budget tackles fake news, rioters

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

An Information Disorder Tackling Unit will be formed in collaboration with Information Technology and Biotechnology department to take stringent action against those who create insecurity and fear in society by spreading fake news, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said on Friday.

"As described by Rashtrakavi Kuvempu, our state Karnataka is a garden of peace for all communities," Siddaramaiah said. "For hundreds of years, people belonging to different religions, languages, cultures and communities have been living in harmony in this land. Therefore, our government will initiate stringent action against those who engage in riots in the name of caste, religion and language." In the wake of increasing cases of fake news and other cybercrime cases, 43 CEN (Cyber, Economic and Narcotics) police stations will be upgraded with a view to strengthening cybercrime branch in the state to investigate and take effective action against those who deceive innocent people, the chief minister said.

Artificial intelligence software, baggage scanners and other state-of-the-art equipment will be procured at a cost of Rs five crore to ensure the smooth administration and security of all prisons of state. —*PTI*

NAMMA BUDGET 2024-25

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU | SALAR | SATURDAY | 17 FEBRUARY 2024

OPPN WALKS OUT OF ASSEMBLY DURING BUDGET

BJP calls Budget hopeless and says it will push State into crisis; Cong says Oppn insulted people of State

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

BJP and JD(S) MLAs walked out of State Assembly during the presentation of Budget and protested on Vidhana Soudha premises on Friday.

Opposition Leader R Ashoka said the State Budget presented by Siddaramaiah on Friday lacks commitment and direction. "This is a hopeless Budget on all fronts and there is no vision for the development of the State and it is contrary to what was claimed by Congress leaders," Ashoka said here on Friday.

The BJP leader said Siddaramaiah's second term is pushing the State into a debt crisis. "In Siddaramaiah's first term, Karnataka's debt rose from Rs 1,39,000 cr to Rs 2,86,790 cr in just five years. The annual interest burden on the State shot up from Rs 8,500 cr to Rs 16,208 cr leaving a debt burden of Rs 44,000 on every citizen," Ashoka claimed.

Opposition leaders protest against the Budget at Vidhana Soudha in Bengaluru on Friday
PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

Ashoka said Siddaramaiah insulted the Constitution by misusing Budget speech for political gains. "This shameless act exposes Congress' sheer desperation to paint a bad picture of the Modi government ahead of Lok Sabha polls," he added.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah flayed the Opposition for walking out of the Assembly, saying BJP cannot accept the reality. "We have told the truth and we are fighting against the injustice done to the State, which is our duty; but they are unable to accept what we are doing," Siddaramaiah said. "No party in history has ever walked out from the Budget session. Just when I had started the Budget speech, BJP MLA V Sunil Kumar said there is nothing in the Budget, which does not make sense." The fog of politics has covered BJP's sense of behaviour in the Assembly and understanding the Budget, he said.

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar said: "Opposition leaders have insulted the people of the State by boycotting the Budget in a democratic system. Ours is a Budget that focuses on building people's lives. The Opposition leaders could not tolerate that despite providing guarantee schemes we have so much money for development works."

Meanwhile, Tejaswi Surya, BJP MP said, "To take money from Hindu temples and use it to fund religious institutions of non -Hindu faiths is the standard SOP of 'secular' leaders like Siddharamiah. Secularism as practiced by them is not just a stick to brow beat the Hindu, it is also a tool to financially enrich others at the cost of the Hindu.

— Salar News

CM breaks tradition, switches briefcase for Lidkar leather bag

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah ditched the tradition of carrying budget documents in a suitcase for his State Assembly address. Instead, he opted for a leather bag crafted by the government-owned Lidkar organization, marking a first in the State's budgetary history.

This move follows similar shifts at the national level, where Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman opted for a bag for the 2024 Interim Budget and former chief minister Basavaraj Bommai did the same. This switch even coincides with the increased focus onLIDKAR, which has over 50,000 artisan families with the popular actor Dolly Dhananjay recently appointed as its Ambassador.

CM's choice of bag is a gesture of promoting the State owned enterprise
PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

Siddaramaiah's choice to switch to a LIDKAR bag is seen by some as a gesture of promoting the State-owned enterprise and highlighting its craftsmanship. The gesture carries a subtle message of breaking free from colonial baggage and embracing local talent.

—Salar News

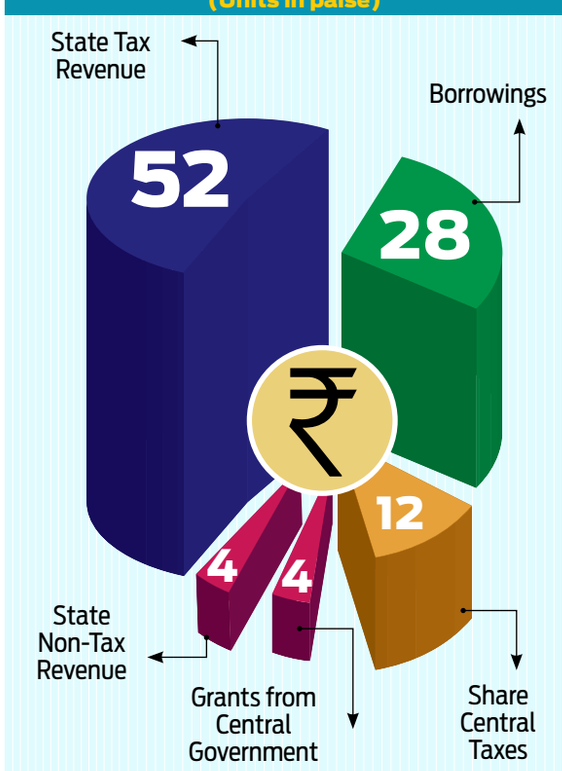
EDUCATION

- SEP to be introduced
- Rs 850 cr for making and repairs of classrooms, toilets
- Rs 100 cr to develop Visveswaraya University on the lines of IIT
- Rs 172 cr for Mysuru's Maharani college
- Rs 120 cr for polytechnics college
- Rs 50 cr for labs, internet in high schools
- Rs 25 cr for free power and water to schools, govt PU colleges
- New varsities in Koppal, Bidar, Yadgir, Raichur and Kalaburagi
- 50 new Morarji Desai Residential Schools
- 100 new Maulana Azad Schools will be opened

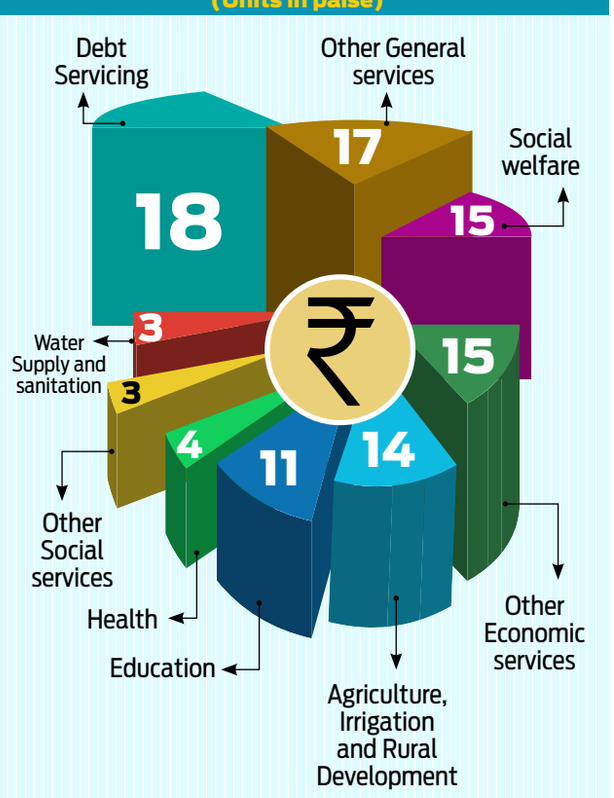
REVENUE

- Bhoo-Suraksha scheme for online land records
- Drone survey of 30,700 grama thana areas to issue property and title deeds
- Rs10 cr given to Climate Change Experience Centre for students
- E-registration facilities for land records to be extended across State
- Selected sub-registrar offices will be open on Sundays

HOW THE RUPEE COMES (Units in paise)



WHERE THE RUPEE GOES (Units in paise)



WOMEN AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

- Rs200 cr to construct 1,000 anganwadis
- Rs 90 cr to provide 75,938 smartphones to anganwadi workers
- Pension of former Devadasis to be enhanced to Rs 2,000 from ₹1,000
- Rs 7.5 cr for 50 women-run Sanjeevini cafes across state
- Enhancement of Pension under Maithri scheme to linguistic minorities from ₹800 to ₹1,200
- ₹10 cr for women self-help groups
- 2,500 coffee kiosks for women

SOCIAL WELFARE

- Rs 2,710 cr to residential schools for SC/ST/BC
- Rs 638 cr for 29 schools under Karnataka Residential Educational Institutional Society
- ₹35cr for SC/ST patients suffering from rare disease
- Food allowance increased to Rs 100 in govt schools for SC/ST/BC in students
- Study chair at Bengaluru University in memory of Padma Shri Dr Siddalingaiah
- Drone training for interested 5,000 ST youngsters
- Free CLAT, MAT, JEE, NEET, CA foundation training to BC students
- Seats will be reserved for children of 23 nomadic communities in residential schools

KANNADA AND CULTURE

- Memorial in memory of former chief minister S Bangarappa
- Rs 1 cr to study Tattvapada, Keerthana sahitya and Bhakti movement
- Study Centre in Gulbarga University to study Sufi saints and other socio-cultural personalities
- 60 per cent of signages mandated in Kannada in offices, shops

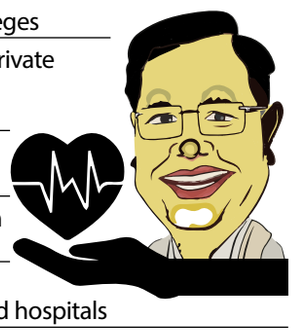
FOREST ECOLOGY

- Rs 10 cr to strengthen 7 elephant and 2 leopard task forces
- Rs 15 cr for eco-tourism and conservation in Honnikeri forest reserve
- New leopard task force formed in Bandipur as animal and human conflict cases are on the rise in forest areas
- 17 water quality measurement stations and 2 environment laboratories

LAW

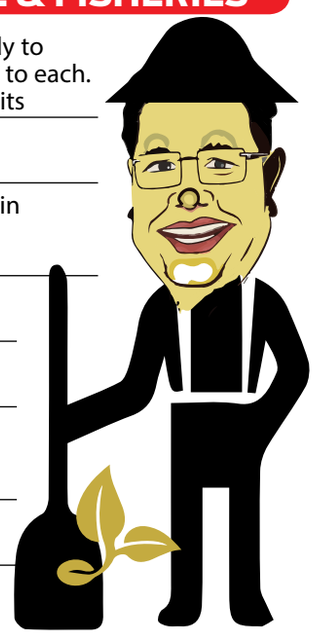
- Rs 175 cr for judicial building construction
- Rs 180 cr to livestream of court proceedings
- Karnataka Prohibition of Violence Against Advocates Bill, 2023 proposal

HEALTH, MEDICAL EDUCATION



- Rs 400 cr for medical colleges
- Rs 350 cr to upgrade 25 private health systems in next 2 years
- Rs 280 cr for 100 bedded taluk hospitals
- Rs187 cr for critical care in 7 districts
- Rs177 cr for 114 modular OTs in medical college and hospitals
- Rs130 cr for 199 health and wellness centres.
- Rs130 cr for super speciality hospitals
- Rs20 cr for chemotherapy centres in each district.
- 50 new blood storage units in North Karnataka in next 2 years
- 430 free laboratories to be set up in Bengaluru in Hub and Spoke model

AGRICULTURE & FISHERIES



- Rs 629 cr for input subsidy to 33.19L farmers up to ₹2K to each. Rs 20 cr for mini fodder kits
- Kishan malls for farmers in selected districts
- Food parks near airports in Bengaluru, Shivamogga, Vijayapura
- Floriculture market in Bengaluru soon
- Spice Park in Chikkamagaluru soon
- 5,000 water bodies to be created over 5 years to counter drought
- ₹3,000 cr investment for fisheries sector
- ₹7 cr for 1st sea ambulance for fisher folks

IT & BT

- Rs 233 cr for Science City in Bengaluru
- Rs 170 cr for science centres/planetariums
- Advanced Genome Editing and Gene Therapy Institute to be set up to promote study and research in health, agriculture
- Knowledge, Health Care, Innovation and Research City (KHIR) will be established in 2000 acres near Bengaluru.
- Rs 150 cr investment for AVGC-XR Policy 3.0. It will to generate 30,000 jobs in animation, visual effects, gaming and comics sectors during 2024-2029
- Signature Business Park near Kempegowda International Airport in Bengaluru at Rs 817 cr. This will attract investments of up to Rs5,000 cr

ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

- Rs100 cr for 200 veterinary institution buildings
- 6% interest subsidy to encourage dairy farming among women

IRRIGATION

- Rs 15,600 cr for balancing reservoir at Tungabhadra
- Rs 7K cr for lift irrigation on 97,698 hectares
- Rs 3,779 for Krishna Bhagya Jala Nigam Lift irrigation projects on 1,09,350 hectares
- Rs 2K cr for canals in Varuna
- Rs 70 cr for filling 38 tanks in Koppal
- Rs 455 cr for KC Valley Phase -2 project which will fill 272 tanks
- Rs 65 cr to provide drinking water to Kalaburagi
- Rs 100 cr for water conservation work

COMMERCE AND INDUSTRIES

- Rs10Kcr for textile policy. Will create 2 lakh jobs in 2024-29
- ₹50 cr for supplemental infrato mega textile park project in Kalaburagi and mini textile parks in 25 dists
- 2K acres for Health Care, Innovation and Research City (KHIR) in Bengaluru. It is expected to attract an investment of 40,000 cr and employment to about 80,000 people

ENDOWMENT

- Rs 158 cr for construction of bridge in Raichur to provide connectivity to Mantralaya
- Rs 5 cr for construction of residential complex in Varanasi

SKILL DEVELOPMENT

- State Skill Policy to create job opportunities
- Entrepreneurship training for 25,000 under Yuvanidhi Plus scheme in Ballari
- Rs 150 cr for govt training centres in Ballari and Chitradurga
- 50K women SHG-owned micro-enterprises in next 2 years

SPORTS

- Rs 35L, Rs 25L or Rs 15L for sports people bagging gold, silver or bronze medal in Asian and Commonwealth
- Health insurance for people who get injured in national or i'ntl tournaments
- Rs 35 for women sports hostels tobe made constructed in 14 places in 2 yrs
- Sports City on 70 acres in Bengaluru

RURAL DEVELOPMENT & PANCHAYAT RAJ

- 9,450 km long rural roads in 189 rural constituencies at Rs5,200 cr
- 1,150 km rural roads in 38 Rural Assembly Constituencies at Rs1,000 cr
- Under MGNREGA, 16 cr person days will be created at Rs 132 cr
- Nanna Guruthu to be implemented in 1,000 gram panchayats of Kalyana Karnataka

PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT

- Rs 5,736 cr for developing 875 km of highways
- Rs 4,000 cr for developing 1,300 km of new highways
- Rs 450 cr for Belagavi Elevated Corridor project
- Rs 5,000 crore set aside for developmentof Kalyana Karnataka
- Construction of 6 railway overbridges at Rs 350 cr

TOURISM

- ₹10 cr for the development of mythological and historically important land
- 530 protected monuments will be digitally documented
- Ropeway and cable car facility in 10 major tourist attractions of State
- Interpretation centres at Bandipur, Dandeli and Kabini for ₹25 cr
- ₹15 cr for revival of 'karez' in Vijayapura

TRANSPORT

- Rs 36 cr for 6 automated driving test tracks in Udupi, Chikkaballapur, Nelamangala, Madikeri, Madhugiri, and Hunsur. Automated test centers at 32 places under PPP model
- ₹10 cr for seizing yards at Devanahalli
- Schemes to digitalise records in B'uru, Belagavi, M'luru and Bhalki

ENERGY

- Target to increase installed capacity to 60,000 Giga Watt in next 7 years
- Subsidy of off-grid solar pump sets increased from 30% to 50%
- 2.5k EV charging stations to come up under PPP model

INFRASTRUCTURE AND PORTS

- Rs 12,147 cr for 9 railway works
- Rs1,600 cr for extending Mysore Airport runway
- Rs1,547 cr for 26 works under SagarMala project

LABOUR

- ₹100 cr to build 10 temporary accommodation facility for construction workers
- ₹311 cr to extend various services and facilities under ESI programme.

CM slams BJP for disrupting budget presentation

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Friday hit out at the opposition BJP and the JD(S) for their "enilla enilla" chorus mocking the budget as having "nothing" and for staging a walk out of the assembly.BJP legislators walked out of the assembly singing in chorus 'Enilla enilla, Siddaramaiahana Budgetinalli Enilla' (There is nothing, there is nothing, Siddaramaiah's budget has nothing). They termed the budget as regressive and said it could push the state behind by 20 years. He who holds the finance portfolio, said Karnataka has never had a precedent of the opposition boycotting the budget."There is no example of a walkout during budget... Rs 3.71 lakh crore budget was tabled but still they (BJP) say 'enilla enilla'. That means they have 'nothing' in their head," Siddaramaiah said during a media interaction after the budget presentation.He said the BJP leaders don't believe in democracy and the constitutional system, and that they have gone politically blank. They are seeing the budget with a jaundiced eye, he claimed. He alleged they came with a plan to oppose the budget.—*PTI*

Ex-MLA booked in fraud case

MYSURU, 16 FEB

A case was filed against former MLA MK Somashekhar and five others for allegedly using fabricated documents to construct an illegal layout at Udbur village on the outskirts of Mysuru. Following a complaint filed by social worker Abhish Sagar, the former MLA and his wife, along with surveyors and officials, are now facing legal scrutiny. The complaint alleged that Somashekhar, his wife Kusuma, along with surveyors Ramesh and Made Gowda, as well as Muda officials and retired PDO Mahanthappa, conspired to establish an illegal layout spanning 9 acres and 21 guntas of land in Udburu village. It is alleged that the accused fabricated false plans and maps of the settlement to deceive the public and illicitly for profit. Special Court of People's Representatives has directed the authorities to file an FIR against the accused and initiate an investigation. 42nd Metropolitan Magistrate of Bengaluru has mandated an inquiry into the matter, with a deadline of two months for the submission of a report.—*Salar News*

Level-3 accreditation for M'luru airport

MANGALURU, 16 FEB

Mangaluru International Airport has received the coveted level-3 airport customer experience accreditation from Airports Council International (ACI), a statement from the MIA here said on Friday. The MIA is the first airport in India under the 5 million passenger category to reach this coveted milestone, a statement said. Issued by the ACI on 2 February, the accreditation is valid for one year. The airport had received the level-2 accreditation in December 2022.Airports that participate in this process undergo a comprehensive assessment and training that includes stakeholder-employee engagement and staff development. It is the only accreditation programme in the airport industry worldwide that provides a 360-degree view of customer experience management. The level-3 accreditation recognises MIA for advanced practices in the specific domain of service design and innovation, airport culture, governance, operation improvement, measurement, customer understanding and strategy.Luis Felipe de Oliveira, director general and CEO at ACI World congratulated Mangaluru International Airport on achieving the accreditation, which will be conferred at the annual ACI customer experience global summit that will be held in Atlanta, USA from 24 to 26 September this year. —*PTI*

Will implement Mekedatu, other irrigation works: CM

Priority will be given to land acquisition, resettlement and rehabilitation

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Asserting his government's commitment to implement irrigation and drinking water projects related to inter-State rivers including Mekedatu over Cauvery, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Friday in the State Assembly detailed clearances and approvals pending with the Central government.

Presenting the 2024-25 Budget in the Assembly, he listed out steps to implement projects such as Mekedatu, Kalasa-Banduri, Upper Krishna, Upper Bhadra and Yettihanole.

A separate project division and two sub-divisions have already been set up to implement the ambitious Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir and drinking water project of Cauvery river valley, Siddaramaiah said, adding that a survey to identify land that will be submerged under this project and the counting of trees have been initiated.He also said action will be taken on priority to commence work early after obtaining the remaining necessary clearances from the competent authorities.He said the Central Water Commission has given clearance to the Detailed Project Report for utilising 3.9 TMC water under Kalasa-Banduri Nala Diversion Project and the State government has begun the tendering anticipating forest clearance from National Board for Wildlife. "However, in the meeting of the National Board for Wildlife headed by the Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, the forest clearance has been deferred," he noted.He also said priority will be given to land acquisition and resettlement and rehabilitation as well as to complete sub-schemes under North Karnataka's ambitious Upper Krishna Phase-III Project, and that all necessary legal measures will be taken up along with pursuing the Central government to notify the final award of Krishna Tribunal-II.

Pointing out that the Central government had announced grants of Rs 5,300 crore for implementation of Upper Bhadra Project in its 2023-24 Budget, Siddaramaiah said no grant has been released so far.

The previous State government congratulated the Prime Minister in its Budget for declaring Bhadra Project as a National Project, he said. "

To address the problem of reduction in water storage capacity of Tungabhadra reservoir due to silt accumulation, and to also fulfil a long-standing demand of farmers of the area, a detailed project report has been prepared for constructing a balancing reservoir near Navali in Koppal district at a cost of Rs 15,600 crore, Siddaramaiah said. —*PTI*

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said a report has been prepared for constructing a balancing reservoir near Navali ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

'Budget, a boon for traders'

SAJJAN RAJ MEHTA
BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Sajjan Raj Mehta ***PHOTO: SALAR***

The State Budget announced on Friday allocated Rs 58,000 crore to freebies and that is could lead to financial problems in Karnataka. However, the initiative to develop Brand Bengaluru will boost the infrastructure in the City, turning it to a world-class metropolitan.

Government's effort to boost resources is a boon. Supply of clean drinking water, improving public transport and managing traffic congestions in the City will boost the standard of living. Besides, the plan to build underground tunnels will help Bengaluru, which is reportedly the sixth most congested City in the world, according to TomTom. The plan to digitalise property records within BBMP limits is also a good move and will cut the red tape.An additional 44 km of Namma Metro line, rail and road connectivity to satellite townships of Devanahalli, Nelamangala, Hoskote, Doddaballapura, Magadi Road and Bidadi will boost trade.

The new textile policy that aims to invest Rs 10,000 crore and generate 2 lakh employments in the State is a great initiative.New textile parks in Kittur Karnataka, Kalyana Karnataka and Mysuru division will create employments for at least 10,000 people.The action to develop Jeans Apparel Park and Common Facility Centre in Ballari and the establishment of Mini Textile Park in 25 districts of the State is another bonus. Besides, the announcement that shops and establishments will be allowed to open till 1 am will certainly help traders.

Sajjan Raj Mehta, trade activist

Property records in City to be digitised

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

- The target of Rs 6,000 crore revenue will be achieved by preventing leakages in the tax collection-system, he said

Government has decided to disgitiseproperty tax records of all 20 lakh properties in Bengaluru and issue digital e-Khata(legal document issued to property owners) from fiscal year 2024-25.Noting that the City was headed towards a 'record' tax collection of Rs 4,300 crore in the current fiscal, which is Rs 1000 crore more than 2022-23, Siddaramaiah said the target in 2024-25 will be Rs 6,000 crore.The target of Rs 6,000 crore revenue will be achieved by preventing leakages in the tax collectionsystem, he said.Siddaramaiah said additional non-tax resources of Rs 2,000 crore will be mobilised throughrevised advertisement policies and premium Floor Area Ratio (FAR) policy from this fiscal year.FAR is a formula based on the building's construction area and total floor area that is usable.He said augmentation of resources, reducing traffic congestion, construction ofquality roads and supply of clean drinking water in Bengaluru are the areas of focus for the government in 2024-25.

Government has also conceptualised 'Brand Bengaluru' to improve the quality of life of people and attract investors to develop the State capital into a world-class city. —*PTI*

BUDGET GETS MIXED REACTIONS

Citizens raise concern about benefits to their sector

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

State Budget 2024 has evoked mixed responses from the public in City with some sceptical about the benefits that it may bring to their field and questioning the implementation of projects announced.

Salar News spoke to a cross-section of people on Friday to gauge their take on this year's State Budget. "It is hard to say how the Budget allocation will affect me directly. It depends on how they handle taxes and infrastructure development," said Arvind Kumar, an electronic store owner. Rise in the cost of living in the City was the concern raised by Anitha S, a retired government employee. "The pensions are barely enough for people like us. I hope they addressed this issue in the Budget allocations."S Vikram,an unemployed youth, raised concern about the lack of job opportunities in the City. "I am an engineering graduate and even after six months of my graduation, I am still finding it hard to get a job in my field of speciality. The State government should create more job opportunities and give priority to people like me," he said.Meenakshi, an IT professional, said: "If they are truly investing in the healthcare infrastructure and staffing, it could improve access to quality care for everyone."With the Liquor prices being revised in the budget, many people had a mixed reactions. "If the prices of liquor increase, it will be another burden on the common people. We already suffer from price hikes in everything, now even our small pleasures will become unaffordable," said Rajesh S, a software engineer.Prakash Gowda, an autorickshaw driver, said: "The prices of LPG and CNG used for auto rickshaws are going up every day. We urge the State government to help poor auto drivers like us and check the price rise."

—*Salar News*

CM reposes faith in Indian Constitution

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

- The cover page of the budget book had the image of the preamble of the Constitution, and the Kannada flag bearing yellow and red colour

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah chose to convey the Congress government's strong belief in the Indian Constitution along with a commitment to the promotion of Kannada in his budget speech delivered in the state Assembly on Friday.

The cover page of the budget book had the image of the preamble of the Constitution, and the Kannada flag bearing yellow and red colour. The back cover had the photo of Vidhana Soudha, Karnataka's seat of power, with the tricolour flying atop.

Presenting his 15th budget on the occasion of 75 years of India becoming a republic,he said, "We are marching ahead towards setting a new example of the Karnataka model of development founded on the principles of justice, equality and fraternity enshrined in our Constitution written by Babasaheb Dr BR Ambedkar."

"Social justice is not just our belief but a broader perspective towards life. The 'Kayaka' (duty) and 'Dasoha' (commensality) principles of 'Basavadi Sharanas' (the founder and followers of Lingayat sect) inspire us towards building an equal society," Siddaramaiah said. —*PTI*

Today marks a new milestone for all 6.41cr Kannadigas as we take a huge leap towards greater equity, equality and socio-economic development in Karnataka. We are delivering our 'historical & path-breaking guarantees' despite obstacles from our detractors BJP and JD(S)

Randeep Singh Surjewala, MP, CWC General Secretary

An excellent budget has been given to Bengaluru City and I would like to congratulate Siddaramaiah and DK Shivakumar for it

ST Somashekar, BJP MLA

Karnataka is impacting badly by huge subsidies, capital expenditure creates jobs, huge cuts and no growth, how can we hope for large job creation?

Mohandas Pai, Chairperson of Manipal Global Education

While entire country is talking about Amritkalam, CM is discussing about the doomsday.They are going to tell a lie and make it the truth

HD Kumaraswamy, JD(S) leader

Ryots struggle to feed livestock

Insufficient rainfall led to failure of crops

KOPPAL, 16 FEB

The plight of drought-stricken farmers in Kushtagi in Koppal district has worsened, with many feeling the sting of deprivation. Already grappling with failed crops due to insufficient rainfall, farmers now face the agonizing challenge of feeding both themselves and their cattle.

Livestock, once the lifeline of farmers in the region, are now at risk of starvation due to the scarcity of fodder. Cattle, buffalo, oxen, goats and sheep, which were essential assets for farmers, are now facing the grim prospect of being sold off or left to starve due to the lack of food. Procuring essential fodder such as bran and fodder has become an arduous task, with shortages reported in villages across the taluk, including Hirenandihala, Shakhapur, Koradakera, Yalaburti, Nerebenchi, Kurubanala, Kandakur, Talavagera, K Bodur, Gudi Kalikeri, Vanageri and Topalakatti.

Some farmers have resorted to purchasing bran fodder from distant places, but the scarcity persists. For many farmers, selling their cattle has become a last resort due to the dire shortage of husk and fodder. However, they are disheartened by the low prices offered by traders and brokers, exacerbating their financial woes.

Honnappa, a farmer from Yalaburti village, said selling cattle at such low prices only adds insult to injury for struggling farmers. With no relief in sight, farmers are left with no choice but to contemplate selling their cattle, despite the lack of buyers willing to pay fair prices. Villager Devappa Shakhapuru said traders are exploiting the situation by offering meagre sums for livestock.

In response to the crisis, farmer leader Ravi Arer has urged the taluk administration to intervene urgently to ensure adequate fodder and water supply for cattle. The community's plea for assistance underscores the pressing need for immediate action to alleviate the suffering of both farmers and their livestock. —*Salar News*

For many farmers, selling their cattle has become a last resort due to the dire shortage of husk and fodder ***PHOTO: PTI***

- In response to the crisis, farmer leader Ravi Arer has urged the taluk administration to intervene urgently to ensure adequate fodder and water supply for cattle

Deadline extended for HSRP number plates

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Karnataka government has extended the deadline for High Security Registration Plates (HSRP) till 31 May. An official order in this regard was issued by Pushpa VS, Under Secretary of the State Transport department, on Friday.Recently, Transport Minister Ramalinga Reddy had informed during the session about the extension of the deadline after the Opposition pointed out at the less registration of HSRP in the State. Previously, the deadline was 17 February.

The extension applies to all the owners of vehicles registered in Karnataka before 1 April, 2019, regardless of the vehicle type. It is decided to slap a fine of Rs 500 - Rs 1,000 for people failing to comply with the HSRP requirement after the new deadline. —*Salar News*

Voter turnout at Teachers Consituency polls at 86%

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Teacher's constituency polls recorded 86.38% voter turnout on Friday. Out of the total 19,152 eligible voters, 16,544 casted their vote. Among them 6,504 of male voters and 10,040 of women voters casted their votes on Friday. A new alliance formed by the BJP and the Janata Dal (Secular) in Karnataka for the Lok Sabha polls underwent its first Legislative Council bye-election for the Bangalore Teachers' constituency. The seat was given to the JDS after the meeting of the state leaders of the two parties.JD(S) nominated A P Ranganath, longtime president of legal cell, while Congress fielded four-time former MLC Puttanna. Polling was conducted across 43 stations in Bengaluru for the teachers' constituency elections and the result of the bengaluru teachers constituency will be out on Tuesday. —*Salar News*

SURGE IN ENROLMENT

School on verge of closure thrives

MANGALURU, 16 FEB

Kukrabettu Government Primary School at Marodi village in Belthangady taluk in Dakshina Kannada district which was once on the verge of closure due to dwindling student numbers has not only managed to thrive but also witnessed a surge in enrolment. The turn of events culminated in the construction of a new school building.In 2019, the school faced an existential crisis with a mere 16 students enrolled. However, under the diligent efforts of SDMC Chairman Prakash Anchan and the collective dedication of the local community, the school's fortunes have been transformed with around 200 students now in the rolls. Anchan, who also chairs Sri Durga Charitable Trust and has a proven track record of reviving schools in Bantwala taluk, rallied former students and villagers to devise a plan to rescue the school from closure. The first step was the formation of a committee, followed by a concerted appeal to parents to transfer their children from private schools to government-run institutions.The response from the community was positive, with around 40 parents heeding the call to enrol their children in the school. Students began streaming in not only from Marodi but also from neighbouring villages, including Peradi, Kashipatna, Kokradi, Savya, Kutlur, Naravi and Shirtadi.To enhance its appeal, Sri Durga Charitable Trust, introduced LKG and UKG classes, along with English medium instruction. Emphasis was placed on quality education, with additional honorary teachers appointed to bolster the teaching staff. Notably, the IEEE Advancing Technology for Humanity provided a Smart Class facility, while MLA Harish Poonja and MP Nalin Kumar Kateel allocated funds for the construction of an impressive eight-room building spanning 5,000 square feet. —*Salar News*

The school faced an existential crisis with a mere 16 students enrolled in 2019 ***PHOTO: PTI***

PHOTO: X/KAVITA CHAUDHARY

Kavita Chaudhary of 'Udaan' fame dies

AMRITSAR, 16 FEB

Kavita Chaudhary, star of the popular Doordarshan serial "Udaan", died at a hospital here following cardiac arrest on Thursday night. She was 67.The actor, also popular as the homemaker Lalita ji in the Surf detergent commercials in India in the late 1980s, was admitted to the hospital a few days ago."She passed away following cardiac arrest last night around 8.30 pm in Amritsar at the hospital. She was admitted to the hospital a few days ago due to low blood pressure. Her condition became critical later," Ajay Sayal, Chaudhary's nephew, said. The last rites were held here on Friday morning. *—PTI*

IIT-Delhi student from Nashik found dead in hostel

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

A 23-year-old student of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), New Delhi, was allegedly found hanging in his hostel room, police said on Friday. "A PCR call was received from IIT Delhi, Dronagiri Hostel, wherein it was informed that a 23-year-old boy from Nashik, Maharashtra, was found hanging in a room in Dronagiri Hostel, IIT Campus," an official of the Delhi police said. The deceased was a student in the M-Tech final year, as per police. A crime team inspection has been done. Further investigation is underway, they said. More details are awaited in this alleged case of suicide. In July 2023, a fourth-year B.Tech student allegedly died by suicide in his hostel room at the institute.The deceased was identified as Ayush (20), a resident of Uttar Pradesh's Bareilly, as per police. *—ANI*

Jet Airways Naresh Goyal seeks interim bail in PMLA case

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

Jet Airways founder Naresh Goyal, an accused in a money laundering case, has moved a plea before a special court here seeking interim bail for treatment of malignancy, which was revealed during tests conducted by private doctors. Court passed an initial order for setting up a medical board to examine Goyal's medical reports as ED sought time to respond to his interim bail plea.Last month, special judge for cases under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) M G Deshpande had allowed Goyal (74) to undergo medical tests by private doctors.In the plea moved on Thursday for interim bail, Jet Airways founder Goyal said malignancy was revealed during the tests undertaken by the private doctors.As per his medical records, Goyal has small tumours in his intestine (common location for small tumours), called 'Neuro Endocrine Tumours' (slow growing cancer). *—PTI*

Cognisable offence filed against 4 in Thane dog abuse

THANE, 16 FEB

Thane police in Maharashtra have registered a cognisable offence against four persons over an incident in which a dog was mercilessly beaten at a pet clinic in the city, an official said on Friday. Cognizable offences are those for which police may make arrests without a warrant and start a probe without a court order.Earlier, a non-cognisable (NC) complaint was registered here after a video of the alleged assault on the canine went viral.Amid public outrage, the police on Thursday night registered a cognisable offence against three staffers and the owner of the pet clinic.Shiv Sena MLA from ThaneA video that went viral earlier this week showed two staffers of the pet clinic beating and kicking the Chow Chow breed dog. *—PTI*

Internet suspended, 1 dead in Manipur clash

CAPF's vehicles were torched following the violence

IMPHAL, 16 FEB

Security forces fired several rounds of tear gas shells and used 'minimum lethal force' to disperse the agitator **PHOTO: PTI**

Manipur government on Friday suspended internet services in Churachandpur district for five days after violence broke out there over an action taken against a policeman.The situation in the district remained tense this morning after the offices of the superintendent of police and the deputy commissioner were vandalised, vehicles used by CAPF were torched by a mob and the national flag at the SP office complex was pulled down, an official said.

Locals claimed that one person died and as many as 30 people were injured in the clash.

"There is apprehension that some anti-social elements might use social media extensively for transmission of images, posts and video messages inciting the public, which might have serious repercussions for the law and order situation..there is imminent danger for loss of lives/ damage to public or private property and widespread disturbances to public tranquillity and communal harmony as a result of inflammatory material and false rumours," the notification said.The violence broke out in the district on Thursday night as the mob barged into the government complex and torched vehicles hours after a head constable of the district police was suspended after he was seen with gunmen in a purported video, an official said.

Security forces fired several rounds of tear gas shells and used "minimum lethal force" to disperse the agitator.State PWD Minister Govindas Konthoujam, considered close to Chief Minister N Biren Singh, has condemned the statement of BJP MLA from Churachandpur, Paoleinlal Haokip, alleging that he had made a "hate campaign" in the wake of the mob violence there. Seven personnel of the India Reserve Battalion have been suspended for dereliction of duties in connection with the looting of arms and ammunition from the special force's Chingarel camp in Manipur's Imphal East district.They have been asked not to leave their headquarters without obtaining prior permission, according to an order issued by the commandant of the 5th India Reserve Battalion on Thursday. *—PTI*

Nat'l Commission wants Prez rule in West Bengal

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Supreme Court on Friday agreed to consider listing a PIL seeking a court-monitored CBI or SIT probe into the violence **PHOTO: PTI**

NCSC National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) Chief Arun Halder on Friday said the commission has recommended the imposition of President's rule in West Bengal in its report submitted to President Droupadi Murmu on alleged harassment of women by TMC supporters in Sandeshkhali.

A delegation of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) had visited Sandeshkhali on Thursday after a large number of women claimed that TMC leader Shajahan Sheikh and his supporters captured swathes of land by force and also sexually harassed them. Many women in Sandeshkhali are demanding the immediate arrest of Sheikh, who has been absconding since an Enforcement Directorate (ED) team that raided his house in connection with an alleged ration scam was attacked by a mob last month. Supreme Court on Friday agreed to consider listing a PIL seeking a court-monitored CBI or SIT probe into the violence in West Bengal's Sandeshkhali village.A day after the filing, PIL was mentioned for urgent listing before a bench comprising Chief Justice DY Chandrachud and Justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra.The plea filed by lawyer Alakh Alok Srivastava in his personal capacity, also seeks compensation for victims of the Sandeshkhali violence and action against officials of the West Bengal Police for alleged dereliction of duty.

Shajahan has been absconding after a mob, allegedly affiliated to him, attacked Enforcement Directorate officials. Supreme Court on Friday assured that it will consider listing for early hearing on public interest litigation seeking transfer of investigation and subsequent trial outside West Bengal in connection to the alleged sexual assault of women living in West Bengal's Sandeshkhali. A BJP central team, which was stopped from visiting the restive Sandeshkhali block, on Friday evening called on West Bengal Governor C V Ananda Bose and said that the party would move court to seek permission to go there. *—PTI*

Delhi factory fire kills 11, CM announces ₹10L relief

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Smoke billows after a fire broke out in a paint factory at Alipur in New Delhi on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Friday announced an ex-gratia of Rs 10 lakh each for the kin of those killed in the fire in a paint factory in Alipur that left 11 people dead.

An explosion and subsequent fire in the paint factory in outer Delhi's Alipur area left 11 people dead. Four people were injured in the fire that broke out on Thursday evening and are hospitalised.

A police officer said it is suspected that the blast was caused by chemicals stored in the godowns.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (outer-north) Ravi Kumar Singh said a police team at the spot saw that the fire had spread to a number of other buildings, including the neighbouring 'Nasha Mukti Kendra', where four-five people were trapped.

Kejriwal said there are allegations that there was delay in the arrival of fire tenders to the spot.

"I will issue instructions for inquiry into the alleged delay in the arrival of fire engines and how the factory was operating in this area," he added.

He also added those whose nearby shops and houses were affected due to the fire will be awarded compensation in line with the government's policy.

Delhi police have registered a case of culpable homicide against the owner of the factory.

The factory was being operated by Akhil Jain of Sonipat, Haryana. *—PTI*

Pakistani quadcopters found hovering near LoC in Poonch

JAMMU, 16 FEB

- Jammu and Kashmir Police recently announced a cash reward of Rs three lakh to anyone providing information about drones

Army troops guarding the Line of Control (LoC) on Friday opened fire to bring down Pakistani quadcopters at two different places in Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district, officials said.However, the flying objects returned to the Pakistan side after briefly hovering over the Indian territory in Balnoi-Mendhar and Gulpur sectors, they said.

They said a search operation was launched in both the sectors to ensure there was no dropping of weapons or narcotics by the quadcopters.Officials said troops noticed two quadcopters entering the Balnoi area of Mendhar around 6.30 am and opened fire but the remotely controlled machines returned.

Similarly, a couple of quadcopters hovering over Gulpur sector around the same time returned in the face of firing by Indian troops, they said.Earlier on Monday, Army troops had fired on an enemy drone after picking up its movement in Mankote area of Mendhar sector.

Pakistan is using drones to drop narcotics and weapons in Jammu and Kashmir.

Jammu and Kashmir Police recently announced a cash reward of Rs three lakh to anyone providing information about drones flown from across the border with a purpose to drop weapons and narcotics. *—PTI*

TERRORIST AIDE HELD WITH ARMS, AMMO IN J&K

KUPWARA, 16 FEB

A terrorist associate has been arrested along with arms and ammunition in the Lalpora area of north Kashmir's Kupwara district, police said on Thursday. Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) of Kupwara Shobhit Saxena, while speaking to ANI said that a joint naka was laid by Kupwara Police, 28 RR and CRPF 162Bn at Gundimacher Bridge.

He further said that during checking, a suspicious movement of one person carrying a white colored bag who was coming from Lalpora towards Gundmacher was observed.

"Today morning, we received input from Army about a suspected terrorist movement here. We put up a joint naka in Lalpora area," he said.

He further said that one pistol, a few rounds of bullets and a few grenades have been recovered from the possession of the accused."We apprehended one suspected person and found one pistol, a few rounds of bullets and a few grenades from him. We took him to the Police station for further investigation. A mobile phone was also recovered," he said.

Saxena further said that an FIR has been registered under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and further investigation is underway. *—ANI*

- Suspicious movement of one carrying a white colored bag was observed

Kerala court rejects graft plaint against CM over sand mining

KOTTAYAM, 16 FEB

Pinarayi Vijayan **PHOTO: PTI**

A Kerala court has rejected a complaint alleging corruption by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and various officials back in 2019 in connection with a government order permitting removal of sand from the Thottappally coastal area in Alappuzha district.

Enquiry Commissioner and Special Judge, Kottayam, M Manoj dismissed the complaint saying that prima facie none of the offences, under the Prevention of Corruption Act and the IPC, as alleged against the CM and others in the complaint were disclosed."The averments in the complaint do not disclose any offence under the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988 or under any other law."The complicity of the respondents in any of the alleged offences are not prima facie made out and disclosed as per the averments in the complaint." the judge said in his order dated 7 February.

The complaint was moved by the President of the Karimanal Khanana Virudha Ekopana Samithi alleging that atomic mineral sand extracted from Thottappally coastal area in the name of Kerala Minerals and Metals Ltd (KMML) was illegally supplied to the Cochin Minerals and Rutile Ltd (CMRL).The complaint, seeking a vigilance enquiry or probe, also claimed that due to the alleged illegal mineral sand mining, the state suffered a loss of over Rs 2,841 crore.Rejecting the allegations in the complaint, the court said that the government order under challenge was issued in May 2019, following the floods in the in 2018, in public interest and to save the life and property of people from flood situations. *—PTI*

OBC PANEL SUBMITS REPORT ON MARATHAS

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

Maharashtra State Backward Class Commission on Friday submitted a report on its survey on the social, economic, and educational backwardness of the Maratha community, the Chief Minister's Office(CMO)said.The massive exercise covered nearly 2.5 crore families.The report will enable the government to introduce a law ensuring reservation for the Maratha community with the backing of necessary data, the CMO said. Government also announced a special session on 20 February to discuss the community's demands for quota in education and government jobs. Activist Manoj Jarange is currently on an indefinite fast in Jalna.The report was submitted by Chairperson of the commission Justice (retd) Sunil Shukre to Chief Minister Eknath Shinde in the presence of Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, the CMO said."The survey (findings) will be discussed in the state cabinet meeting," it said, quoting Shinde. *—PTI*

AGAINST HIT-AND-RUN LAW

Auto and cab drivers along with transport sector employees take part in a protest against the Central government on the increase in jail terms in 'hit-and-run' cases in Hyderabad, on Friday **PHOTO: PTI**

Lookout notice against Haldwani mastermind

DEHRADUN, 16 FEB

- With fresh arrests, total number of rioters held in connection with incidents of stone pelting and arson triggered by the demolition of a madrassa in on 8 February has climbed to 42

A lookout notice has been issued against Haldwani violence key accused Abdul Malik and his son Abdul Moid, while five more rioters have been arrested, police said on Friday.

With the fresh arrests, the total number of rioters held in connection with incidents of stone pelting and arson triggered by the demolition of a madrassa in the town on 8 February has climbed to 42, they said.

Malik had constructed the madrassa and had vehemently opposed its demolition. He is said to be the mastermind behind the clashes.

Relaxation of curfew for a few hours with certain restrictions continued on Friday in Banbhoolpura area, which was the epicentre of the violence.

However, internet service in the area remained suspended for the eighth day.

Authorities on Thursday had relaxed curfew in Banbhoolpura area of the town for varied durations.

Violence broke out on 8 February over the demolition of an illegally built madrassa in the Banbhoolpura area, with locals hurling stones and petrol bombs at municipal workers and police, forcing many police personnel to seek refuge at a police station, which the mob then set on fire.

In the violence, six rioters were killed and more than a 100, including police personnel and mediapersons, were injured, according to the police. *—PTI*

Will probe incident on LS member: Akasa

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Akasa Air on Friday said it will carry out a detailed investigation into the "deboarding experience" of BJP leader and Lok Sabha member Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur at the Delhi airport after she alleged that airline staff conspired and tried to cause loss to her.

Details about the incident that happened on Thursday, after the member landed at the Delhi airport from Mumbai in an Akasa Air flight could not be immediately ascertained.

In a post on X on Friday, Thakur alleged that Akasa Air's duty manager Imran and his associates conspired and tried to cause loss to her.

Tagging civil aviation minister Jyotiraditya Scindia, she requested the minister to take action about the incident. *—PTI*

AIR INDIA ROW

Denied wheelchair, 80-yr-old AI passenger dies

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

- As advised by the airport doctor attending to him , the airline said he was immediately rushed to the hospital, where he was declared dead

An octogenarian Air India passenger, who had requested for a wheelchair at Mumbai airport but decided to walk as he was asked to wait due to heavy demand for wheelchair, died after collapsing at the time of immigration process.

The incident happened at the airport on 12 February after the passenger landed in an Air India flight from New York.

An airline spokesperson on Friday said the passenger was more than 80 years old.

However, the non-availability of a wheelchair at the airport prompted the passenger to walk on foot for one and a half kilometers to the immigration office, sources said.

"In an unfortunate incident, one of our guests flying from New York to Mumbai on 12 February, fell ill while proceeding to clear immigration with his wife, who was on wheelchair," the airline said.

As advised by the airport doctor attending to him after taking ill, the airline said the passenger was immediately rushed to the hospital, where he was declared to have passed away.

According to Air India, it is in constant touch with the family members of the bereaved, extending necessary assistance, and added that it has a clearly laid down policy to offer wheelchair assistance to all passengers who pre-book the same.An official of Mumbai airport operator MIAL said wheelchair assistance is purely a service given by the airline. There was no official comment from MIAL on the incident.

At terminal, the wheelchair inventory and manpower assistance is also managed by the respective airline ground handling. The airport operator only helps coordinating with the airline in case any passenger requires help, the official added. *—PTI*

Gujarat HC rejects Kejriwal's plea to quash summons

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Gujarat High Court dismissed pleas by AamAadmi Party leaders ArvindKejriwal and Sanjay Singh to quash the summons issued against them on Friday. In a criminal defamation case over their comments on Prime Minister NarendraModi's educational qualification, the plea was dismissed. Through their pleas, Kejriwal and Singh had challenged the summons by a trial court in the case filed by Gujarat University and the subsequent order of the session's court dismissing their revision applications against the summons. Seeking the quashing of the summons, the two leaders had said that Gujarat University cannot file a defamation case before a magistrate court and rather should move the session's court. *—PTI*

SC to consider urgent listing of Sharad's plea against EC decision

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Supreme Court said it will consider for early listing a plea of SharadPawar challenging an Election Commission order recognising Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister AjitPawar-led faction as the real Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), on Friday. A bench headed by Chief Justice of India (CJI) DY Chandrachud took note of the submissions of senior advocate AbhishekSinghvi, appearing for the veteran leader, that the plea needed urgent listing in view of a recent order of Maharashtra Assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar.Narwekar held that NCP faction led by AjitPawar was real NCP and that the anti-defection provisions in Constitution cannot be used to stifle internal dissent. *—PTI*

EAM holds meetings with Blinken and Cameron

MUNICH, 16 FEB

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Friday discussed issues related to bilateral cooperation as well as those of key global and regional concern with prominent leaders, including US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his British counterpart David Cameron here in Germany. The meetings took place on the sidelines of the prestigious Munich Security Conference, in its 60th edition, which is the world's leading forum for debate on international security. The Indian minister is to participate in a panel discussion on 'Growing the Pie: Seizing Shared Opportunities,' which is also to be addressed by German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, and Blinken on Saturday. *—PTI*

'Haldwani violence culmination of communal tension'

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

A civil rights groups-led fact-finding team has claimed that the violent clashes that shook Haldwani on 8 February was not an isolated incident but rather the culmination of escalating communal tensions fuelled by divisive rhetoric and policies. Violence broke out on February 8 over the demolition of an illegally built madrassa in the Banbhoolpura area, with locals hurling stones and petrol bombs at municipal workers and police, forcing many police personnel to seek refuge at a police station, which the mob then set on fire. In the clashes, six "rioters" were killed and more than a 100, including police personnel and mediapersons, were injured, according to the police. A look-out notice has been issued against Haldwani violence key accused Abdul Malik and his son Abdul Moid, while five more rioters have been arrested, police said on Friday. A civil society fact-finding team comprising members of the Association for Protection of Civil Rights and Karawan-e-Mohabbat had visited Haldwani on Wednesday. *—PTI*

Haryana Police uses tear gas on farmers at Shambhu border

Union ministers and farmers will meet on 18 Feb for 4th round of talks

CHHATTISGARH, 16 FEB

Haryana Police on Friday fired tear gas shells to disperse protesting farmers when they moved towards the barricades at Shambhu border near Ambala.

Amid the impasse, Union ministers and farmer leaders will meet on 18 February for the fourth round of talks.

The two sides met on 8, 12, 15 February as well but those talks remained inconclusive.

The fresh confrontation comes on the fourth day of farmers' 'Delhi Chalo' march, called by SamyuktaKisanMorcha (Non-Political) and KisanMazdoorMorcha, to press Government to accept their demands, including a legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP) for crops.

Farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher on Friday accused Centre of trying to "suppress" the voices of the protesters, claiming social media accounts of farmers and YouTubers have been suspended.

On the fourth day of the protest, a 63-year-old farmer, who was among the protesters at the Shambhu border, died of a heart attack.

Pandher said that during the talks, they raised the issue of the use of "force" against farmers by paramilitary personnel deployed at Punjab-Haryana border who fired tear gas shells at the protesters.

He claimed that around 70 farmers have sustained serious injuries in an action by Haryana security personnel at Shambhu and Khanauri borders.

Tear gas being fired upon the protesting farmers at the Shambhu Border during the Samyukta Kisan Morcha's Bharat Bandh, in Patiala district on Friday **PHOTO: PTI**

- Haryana Police on Friday fired tear gas shells to disperse protesting farmers when they moved towards the barricades at Shambhu border near Ambala.

Mann said he raised with Centre the issue of suspension of internet services in certain areas in Sangrur, Patiala and Fatehgarh Sahib, and that of Haryana security personnel using a drone to drop tear gas shells on protesters inside Punjab's territory.

Union Agriculture and Farmer Welfare Minister ArjunMunda, Commerce and Industry Minister PiyushGoyal and Minister of State for Home Affairs NityanandRai represented Centre at Thursday's meeting. Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann and Finance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema also joined the meeting.

Besides a legal guarantee of MSP, the farmers are demanding the implementation of Swaminathan Commission's recommendations, pension for farmers and farm labourers, farm debt waiver, no hike in electricity tariff, withdrawal of police cases and "justice" for the victims of the 2021 LakhimpurKheri violence, reinstatement of Land Acquisition Act, 2013, and compensation to the families of the farmers who died during a previous agitation in 2020-21. *—PTI*

SKM BANDH: BUSES STAY OFF ROADS IN PUNJAB

CHANDIGARH, 16 FEB

Commuters in Punjab faced inconvenience on Friday as many buses stayed off the roads in response to SamyuktaKisanMorcha's call for a 'Bharat Bandh' to press government to accept farmers' demands including a legal guarantee of MSP. Many farmer bodies including BhartiKisan Union (Rajewal), BharatiyaKisan Union (Dakunda), BharatiyaKisan Union (Lakhowal), BharatiyaKisan Union (Qadian) and KirtiKisan Union are taking part in the bandh. Meanwhile, members of the BhartiyaKisan Union (Charuni) staged 'dharnas' at several toll plazas in Haryana. They did not let the toll authorities charge fee from commuters.

Protests were also held in parts of western Uttar Pradesh. BharatiyaKisan Union (BKU) leader RakeshTikait participated in a protest held at Bagovali crossing on the Delhi-Dehradun National Highway in Muzaffarnagar.

"We are holding the protest for the demands, including implementation of the Swaminathan Commission report, loan waiver etc," Tikait said. *—PTI*

'EVERYONE LEAVING'

Congress party is trapped in circle of nepotism: Modi

JAIPUR, 16 FEB

Narendra Modi ***PHOTO:PTI***

Prime Minister NarendraModi hit out at Congress, saying that everyone is leaving the party as it is trapped in the vicious circle of nepotism and dynastic politics, on Friday.

He said Congress' sole agenda is to "oppose Modi" and the party does the opposite of what he does, even if it leads to a loss for the country.

Modiwas virtually addressing an event, 'Viksit Bharat, Viksit Rajasthan', in Jaipur. He also laid the foundation stones of projects worth about Rs 17,000 crore and inaugurated various development works.

A big problem with Congress is that it lacks the farsightedness to frame positive policies. Neither can Congress foresee the future nor does it have any road map for it.

"When Modi fulfils his guarantees, some people lose sleep. You are looking at the situation of Congress, you have recently taught a lesson to Congress but it does not accept it," he said, referring to Rajasthan assembly election results.

They do not even take the name of 'Viksit Bharat' because Modi is working for it, they avoid 'Make in India' because Modi promotes it, and they do not speak about 'Vocal' for Local because Modi insists on it.

"When India became the fifth-largest economic power, the whole country was happy but Congress people were not happy. When Modi says that India will become number three in the world in the next term, the whole country is filled with confidence but Congress people find disappointment in this too," he said. Such politics does not inspire young India at all.

During Congress era, the entire country faced darkness due to the shortage of electricity.

"After coming to power, we focused on getting the country out of this power shortage. We made policies and took decisions and laid emphasis on the new sector of solar energy." *—PTI*

Jharkhand Governor CP Radhakrishnan administers the oath to Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader Basant Soren during the swearing-in ceremony of new cabinet ministers at Raj Bhavan in Ranchi on Friday **PHOTO: IANS**

Shibu Soren's son, 7 others sworn in as ministers in J'khand

RANCHI, 16 FEB

Basant Soren, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) supremo ShibuSoren's youngest son, on Friday took oath as minister in the ChampaiSoren-led government in Jharkhand, along with seven others.

Basant is also the younger brother of former Jharkhand chief minister HemantSoren, who is in judicial custody in a money laundering case linked to an alleged land scam. The new faces in the 12-member cabinet are JMM's Chaibasa MLA Deepak Birua and BasantSoren.

BasantSoren was elected as an MLA from Dumka assembly constituency, after he defeated BJP's Louis Marandi with a margin of 6,842 votes in a by-poll held in November 2020. Birua won the Chaibasa seat by defeating BJP's J B Tubid by more than 26,000 votes in the 2019 Assembly polls.

- Basant Soren, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) supremo ShibuSoren's youngest son, on Friday took oath as minister in the ChampaiSoren-led government in Jharkhand, along with seven others.

Those who retained their ministerial berths include Rameshwar Oraon, Banna Gupta and BadalPatralekh of the Congress in addition to JMM's Mithilesh Kumar Thakur, HafizulHasan and Bebi Devi. Governor CP Radhakrishnan administered the oath of office and secrecy to the ministers.

The oath-taking ceremony was held at the BirsaMandap of Raj Bhavan in presence of senior leaders of the JMM-led alliance and other government officials. "The portfolios will be distributed today. We will take forward the work of Jharkhand's development after assigning responsibilities to every minister," the CM said.

Earlier on 2February, 67-year-old ChampaiSoren was sworn in as the 12th chief minister of the state, while senior Congress leader AlamgirAlam and RJD leader SatyanandBhokta took oath as ministers. JMM executive president HemantSoren was arrested by the ED on January 31, shortly after he resigned as the chief minister. *—PTI*

Priyanka in hospital, will not join Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said that she has been admitted to hospital due to an illness and hence would not join the party's Bharat JodoNyayYatra on Friday.

She sent her best wishes to her brother Rahul Gandhi and other Congress leaders for the NyayYatra and said she would join them as soon as she felt better. The Rahul Gandhi-led Yatra is set to enter Uttar Pradesh late on Friday evening.

Vadra was supposed to join her brother at Chandauli in Uttar Pradesh after the Yatra entered the state from Bihar, sources said. "I was eagerly waiting for the Bharat JodoNyayYatra to reach Uttar Pradesh. But due to an illness, I had to be admitted to the hospital today itself. I will join the Yatra as soon as I feel better."Till then, I give my best wishes to all the Yatris -- my dear brother and my colleagues from Uttar Pradesh, who are diligently preparing for the journey -- reaching Chandauli-Banaras," Vadra said in a post in Hindi on X.

Former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi is leading the Bharat JodoNyayYatra from Manipur to Mumbai. The Yatra is currently passing through Bihar. Gandhi and Congress president MallikarjunKharge addressed a mega rally in Bihar's Aurangabad on Thursday. *—PTI*

RJD leader and former Deputy chief minister Tejaswi Yadav drives a car carrying Congress leader Rahul Gandhi during the 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra', in Sasaram, Bihar on Friday **PHOTO: PTI**

PM doesn't want to spend on soldiers' salary: Rahul Gandhi

MOHANIA, 16 FEB

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Friday attacked NarendraModi government, alleging that it brought Agniveer scheme to spend the defence budget for the benefit of a big business house, instead of for emoluments paid to the soldiers.

Gandhi made the allegation at Mohania in Kaimur district of Bihar, bordering Uttar Pradesh, a region from where youngsters are known to enrol in the armed forces on a large scale and which was witness to extensive protests against Agniveer scheme two years ago.

Former Congress president said, "This is because Modi government does not want to spend the defence budget on salary and other perks of soldiers. It wants to spend the amount for the benefit of Adani".

Gandhi has been levelling various charges against Adani Group. The corporate group, however, rejected them all.

An Agniveer will not get salary and pension on par with a regular army soldier nor will he get access to the canteen. Worse still, he will not be treated a martyr (in case of death on duty), even though he will be discharging his duties with the same passion as a regular jawan," Gandhi said.

Gandhi said, "If you look at the coverage in the media, you find little mention of farmers and other people and Opposition leaders like us. You will find Modi sharing space with his friends in the big businesses and also celebrities like Amitabh Bachchan and AishwaryaRai".

The remark was aimed at Bihar chief minister who recently dumped Opposition bloc INDIA and returned to BJP-led coalition.

Gandhi added: "Because of the policies of Modi government, youngsters can no longer look for employment in the armed forces, railways or any other public sector unit. The government in Delhi wants to reduce you all to the status of a contract labour who can be fired at will." *—PTI*

7 BJP MLAs suspended from Delhi Assembly

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Seven BJP MLAs were suspended for the remainder of Budget session of Delhi Assembly for interrupting Lt Governor's address. BJP MLAs had interrupted Lt Governor VK Saxena multiple times during his address on Thursday as they sought to attack ArvindKejriwal government. Delhi Assembly Speaker Ram NiwasGoel had also sent the matter of disruption to Privileges Committee. Pandey said that Opposition members acted in a "planned manner" while disrupting LG's address which lowered the prestige of House. Seven members of BJP barring Leader of Opposition Ramvir Singh Bidhuribe suspended from the proceedings of House.—*PTI*

RESOLUTION PASSED

T'gana to take up household caste survey

HYDERABAD, 16 FEB

The resolution moved by Backward Classes Welfare Minister Ponnam Prabhakar, was adopted after a debate in the Housey **PHOTO: X**

Telangana Legislative Assembly here on Friday passed a resolution to take up a comprehensive door-to-door household caste survey in the state so as to plan and implement various plans for the progress of backward classes, SC and ST citizens and other weaker sections.

The resolution, moved by Backward Classes Welfare Minister Ponnam Prabhakar, was adopted after a debate in the House.

"That this house resolves to take up a comprehensive door-to-door household survey (socio, economic, educational, employment, political and caste survey ('Kula Ganana') of entire Telangana State as per the decision of Council of Ministers of 4th February, 2024 so as to plan and implement various socio, economic, educational, employment and political opportunities for the amelioration of Backward Classes, SC and ST citizens of the state and other weaker sections of the state," the resolution said.

Stating that the Congress has a history of working for the welfare of weaker sections and minorities, Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy said the UPA-1 government had appointed a panel led by Justice RajinderSachar for the welfare of Muslim minorities and taken steps accordingly.

He said his government, while collecting data of all sections of society in the state, is making efforts to bring progress to backward classes in economic, political, employment and educational spheres, fulfilling the promise of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi.

Comprehensive plans and policies would be formulated scientifically for the benefit of minorities, just as it was earlier done by the Congress as per the Sachar panel, he said. Observing that the previous BRS regime in the state did not make public the findings of an 'intensive household survey' conducted when it came to power in 2014, Revanth Reddy said his government would do the opposite.

- The resolution, moved by Backward Classes Welfare Minister Ponnam Prabhakar, was adopted after a debate in the House

"With this resolution, mainly our intention is to strengthen backward classes. Our main intention is to make the backward classes, who are the ruled, the rulers. Our government's intention is to strengthen them financially by allocating funds keeping in mind their population," he said. *—PTI*

ENCROACHED LAND ALLOTTED TO DELHI HC: AAP TELLS SC

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

AAP has told Supreme Court that it has not "encroached" the land of Delhi High Court at Rouse Avenue and that the space was allotted to it in 2015.

Moving Supreme Court against a direction for immediate removal of its office space at Rouse Avenue, the party said it will severely prejudice the party as well as the fairness of the electoral process in view of upcoming LokSabha polls.

Maintaining that the party remains ready and willing to vacate the subject premises, it requested top court to direct that such vacation be required only after at least one of the two office spaces that AAP is entitled to as a National Party are allotted to it in New Delhi Municipal area. *—PTI*

UK voters deliver double trouble for Rishi Sunak

Dan Egan won House of Commons seat of Kingswood

LONDON, 16 FEB

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak suffered two heavy blows to his leadership ahead of a general election later this year as the Opposition Labour Party overturned strong Conservative majorities to win by-elections in England on Friday.

Labour's Dan Egan won the House of Commons seat of Kingswood, southwest England, and the party's Gen Kitchen won Wellingborough, in the East Midlands region of England. The results reflect double trouble for the British Indian leader as the Conservatives had won both seats by decisive margins at the last general election under Boris Johnson in December 2019.

Another emerging trend saw the far-right Reform UK – the re-organised anti-immigration Brexit Party – coming third, ahead of the Liberal Democrats and Green Party, piling further pressure on the Conservatives on contentious issues such as migration. The latest results from this week's polls are the ninth and 10th by-election defeats for the Tory-led government since the 2019 general election.

The results shows trouble for Rishi Sunak as Conservatives had won both seats by decisive margins at the last election **PHOTO: IANS**

The by-poll in Kingswood was held after Tory leader Chris Skidmore resigned as an MP in protest over Sunak's green policies. Labour's Egan managed to overturn his majority of more than 11,000 in the seat. In Wellingborough, the voter followed Tory MP Peter Bone being recalled by his constituency over claims of bullying and sexually inappropriate behaviour, which he denies. Labour's Kitchen overturned his majority of more than 18,000 to win the seat with a swing of 28.5 per cent – the second highest of all time.

"The Kingswood and Wellingborough results show that people want change and are ready to put their faith in a changed Labour Party to deliver it," said Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer. "The Tories have failed, Rishi's recession proves that. Labour is back in the service of working people," he said.

The twin defeats will come as a major blow for the governing Tories as they prepare for a general election, which Sunak, 43, has indicated will be held in the second half of the year.

The party, which has already been trailing Labour in opinion polls, sought to downplay the significance of the by-election result as a vote of discontent against the Tories. *—PTI*

Zelenskyy to sign security deal with Germany, France

BERLIN, 16 FEB

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is expected to sign bilateral security agreements with Germany and France on Friday as Kyiv works to shore up Western support nearly two years after Russia launched its full-scale war.

The Ukrainian leader is meeting German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin and continuing to Paris to meet French President Emmanuel Macron. The bilateral security and long-term support agreements follow a security agreement between Ukraine and the UK signed when British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak visited Kyiv last month. That accord covers the next 10 years.

Zelenskyy will continue Saturday to the Munich Security Conference, an annual gathering of high-ranking security and foreign policy officials, where he plans meetings with US Vice President Kamala Harris among others. *—AP*

US warns key Ukrainian town could fall to Russia

WASHINGTON, 16 FEB

Russian troops have made gains in Avdiivka, threatening to encircle it **PHOTO: PTI**

The US has warned that Russia could seize Ukraine's key eastern town of Avdiivka - the scene of some of the fiercest fighting in recent months.

"Avdiivka is at risk of falling into Russian control," National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said, citing Ukraine's ammunition shortages. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy vowed to do everything to "save as many Ukrainian lives as possible".

Russian troops have made gains in Avdiivka, threatening to encircle it. The town - which has been almost completely destroyed - is seen as a gateway to nearby Donetsk, the regional Ukrainian capital seized by Russian-backed fighters in 2014 and later illegitimately annexed by Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. At Thursday's briefing in Washington, Kirby said Avdiivka could fall

- The town has been almost completely destroyed - is seen as a gateway to nearby Donetsk, the regional Ukrainian capital seized by Russian-backed fighters in 2014

largely "because the Ukrainian forces on the ground are running out of artillery ammunition".

"Russia is sending wave after wave of conscript forces to attack Ukrainian positions," he said. "And because Congress has yet to pass the supplemental bill, we have not been able to provide Ukraine with the artillery shells that they desperately need to disrupt these Russian assaults.

"Russian forces are now reaching Ukrainian trenches in Avdiivka, and they're beginning to overwhelm Ukrainian defences."

Earlier this week, the US Senate approved a $95bn (£75bn) foreign aid package - including $60bn for Ukraine - after months of political wrangling, but it faces an uphill battle in the House of Representatives. *—BBC News*

Mexico will likely elect a woman as its next President

MEXICO CITY, 16 FEB

Mexico is almost certain to elect its first female president in June — both leading candidates are women — but it's almost equally as certain that she won't have much room to act independently of outgoing President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The populist president has continued proposing new, expensive projects in the closing months of his administration, before he leaves office on 30 September. He will also leave a lot of big-ticket projects unfinished. That will probably leave his successor with her hands tied for much of her six-year term. Even if opposition candidate Xóchitl Gálvez wins, a mountain of financial commitments will weigh on her. The candidate of López Obrador's party, former Mexico City mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, leads in polls. A third male candidate from a small party has almost no chance of winning. *—AP*

Shooting in US city kills 1, injures 2

WASHINGTON, 16 FEB

A shooting on a street in Wyoming's capital killed one man and wounded two others. The shooting at around 2 pm on Thursday in a residential area near restaurants and offices happened about 1.6 km from the state Capitol, Cheyenne Police Department spokeswoman Alexandra Farkas said. The shooting at around 2 pm on Thursday in a residential area near restaurants and offices happened about 1.6 km from the state Capitol, Cheyenne Police Department spokeswoman Alexandra Farkas said. Investigators weren't yet sure what led to the shooting and who the victims were, including whether those wounded were adults, Farkas said. The shooting did not involve police, who declared the scene safe soon after, Farkas said. The shooting did not involve police, who declared the scene safe soon after, Farkas said. *—AP*

Indian-origin man identified as suspect in suicide in US

NEW YORK, 16 FEB

Anand Henry, an Indian-origin former Meta software engineer is suspected of killing his wife and twin sons before turning a gun on himself in a gruesome murder-suicide in the US state of California, according to authorities. Henry, 37, and his wife, Alice Benziger, 36, were found dead in the bathroom of their home in Alameda de las Pulgas on Monday morning, according to the San Mateo Police Department. A 9mm handgun registered to Henry was lying on the bathroom floor by their bodies. "Our investigation shows Benziger succumbed to multiple gunshot wounds, while Henry suffered from a single shot," police said in a statement on Thursday. The 4-year-old twin boys, meanwhile, did not die from gunfire. They showed no signs of trauma, and authorities have not yet determined their cause of death. Police allege that Henry was responsible for all four deaths. *—PTI*

Hong Kong arrests 7 in $1.8B money laundering case

HONG KONG, 16 FEB

Hong Kong customs officials have arrested seven people linked to the territory's largest ever money laundering case, involving about 14 billion Hong Kong dollars (USD 1.8 billion) some of it linked to a scam case in India. The seven local residents, aged between 23 and 74, were part of a large-scale transnational syndicate that used various shell companies and bank accounts to transfer large sums from overseas to the city under the guise of running international trading businesses, customs officials said Friday. One account once received as much as 100 million Hong Kong dollars (USD 12.8 million) on a single day, they said. Ip Tung-ching, the head of customs financial investigation bureau, said 2.9 billion Hong Kong dollars (USD 371 million) of the total was suspected to be linked to a scam case involving a mobile application in India. *—AP*

PML-N & PPP set to discuss power-sharing deal: Report

ISLAMABAD, 16 FEB

A second round of talks between the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and the Pakistan Peoples Party is expected to take place on Friday on the power-sharing formula between them for the formation of a coalition government, according to a media report.

The Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari-led PPP has promised to back PML-N in the formation of a government as well as the election of the next prime minister, on the condition that Nawaz Sharif's party will support them in elections to key constitutional offices like that of the President.

The next meeting between the two sides is likely to take place on Friday **PHOTO: PTI**

A scheduled second round of talks between the Contact and Coordination Committees (CCCs) of the PPP and PML-N could not take place on Thursday, as both sides sought more time to assess proposals that came up in their first meeting.

The next meeting between the two sides is likely to take place on Friday. *—PTI*

'Top army leaders trying to topple Imran's govt'

ISLAMABAD, 16 FEB

A leading but disgruntled right-wing Pakistani politician has accused the top military leaders of toppling the government of Imran Khan in 2022. Maulana Fazlur Rehman of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) claimed during a Samaa TV talk show on Thursday night that the "former army chief Gen (rtd) Qamar Javed Bajwa toppled the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) government." Recalling the no-confidence motion against the PTI founder, Rehman said: "The PPP was moving the no-confidence motion against the PTI. Gen Bajwa and Faiz Hameed were in touch with us at the time of no-confidence motion." "Gen Bajwa, Faiz Hameed asked all parties to do this (bringing a vote of no-confidence motion)," he claimed. The channel reported on its website that Rahman told the host in response to a question: "Someone should stand up to the establishment and say it is doing wrong". *—PTI*

INVICTUS GAMES

Prince Harry, the Duke of Sussex, hits the wall as he slides down the track on a skeleton sled during an Invictus Games training camp, in Whistler, British Columbia **PHOTO: DUKEANDDUCHESSOFSUSSEXDAILY**

'Biden admin working very hard to stop attacks on Indian students'

WASHINGTON, 16 FEB

US President Joe Biden and his administration are working very hard to thwart and disrupt attacks on Indian and Indian American students, the White House has said.

The announcement by John Kirby, Coordinator for Strategic Communications at the National Security Council in the White House comes amid a slew of attacks on Indian and Indian American students in various parts of the country.

"There is no excuse for violence, certainly based on race or gender or religion or any other factor. That's just unacceptable here in the United States," Kirby told reporters here when asked about the series of attacks on students from India and also those from the Indian American community. "The president and this administration have been working very, very hard to make sure we're doing everything we can to work with state and local authorities to try to thwart and disrupt those kinds of attacks and make it clear to anybody who might consider them that they'll be held properly accountable," Kirby said.

Vivek Saini, a student working part-time in a department store, died following an attack by a drug addict in Lithonia, Georgia in January. *—PTI*

Imran Khan picks Omar as PM nominee

ISLAMABAD, 16 FEB

Jailed cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan has named a man in hiding as his pick for Pakistan's prime minister.

Omar Ayub Khan will run against the candidate of Imran Khan's rivals. Ayub, one of the former prime minister's party leaders, is currently wanted by police on criminal charges. That does not bar him from running. However, despite Khan's independents unexpectedly winning the most seats in last week's election, they do not have enough to form a government.

Currently, the two main rivals appear on course to take control, after they formed a coalition - Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

A senior leader of Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) party, Asad Qaiser, announced Mr Ayub as his pick for PM after meeting with the former premier in prison. Members of Pakistan's National Assembly will elect the new prime minister and 56-year-old Ayub will face off against the PML-N's Shehbaz Sharif, Nawaz Sharif's brother. *—PTI*

Pak caretaker govt hikes petrol price

Pakistan's outgoing caretaker government on Thursday increased the petrol price by Pakistan Rupees (PKR) 2.73 per litre to PKR 275.62 per litre for the next 15 days, Pakistan-based Geo News reported. The decision has been taken as per the recommendations of the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (OGRA). *—ANI*

4 PATIENTS DIE AS OXYGEN RUNS OUT IN GAZA HOSPITAL

RAFAH, 16 FEB

The storming by Israeli troops of southern Gaza's main hospital brought chaos to hundreds of staff and patients inside, as health officials Friday said four people in intensive care died after their oxygen cut off. Troops were searching the facility, where the military said it believes the remains of hostages abducted by Hamas might be located.

The raid came after troops had besieged Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis for nearly a week, with staff, patients and others inside struggling under heavy fire and dwindling supplies, including food and water. Hours before troops seized the hospital Thursday, Israeli fire killed a patient and wounded six others inside the complex, staff said.

Negotiations over a ceasefire in Gaza, meanwhile, appear to have stalled, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Friday pushed back hard against the US vision for after the war — particularly its calls for the creation of a Palestinian state. After speaking overnight with President Joe Biden, Netanyahu wrote on X that Israel will not accept "international dictates regarding a permanent settlement with the Palestinians."*—AP*

Israel eliminates senior Hezbollah commander Ali Md Al-Dabs

TEL AVIV, 16 FEB

The Israel Defence Forces revealed on Thursday evening that on Wednesday night its forces killed in Lebanon who it called a "central commander" of Hezbollah's al-Hajj Radwan Force, Ali Muhammad Al-Dabs, along with his deputy Hassan Ibrahim Issa and another Hamas terrorist.

Al-Dabs, said the IDF, was one of the masterminds of the attack at the Megiddo Junction located in northern Israel in March 2023. He led, planned and carried out many of Hezbollah's terrorist activities against the State of Israel, in particular, during the war in Gaza. His elimination was carried out in an Israel Air Force strike on a military structure of the Hezbollah terrorist organization in Nabatieh, southern Israel. The al-Hajj Radwan Force is a special operations terror unit whose mission is to infiltrate the territory of Israel in the north.

The killing of Ali Muhammad Al-Dabs came in a week in which fighting with Hezbollah escalated and one Israeli soldier was killed in a Hezbollah rocket attack on Wednesday. *—ANI*

Taiwan tracks eight Chinese army aircraft

TAIPEI, 16 FEB

Amid escalating tensions, the Taiwan Ministry of National Defence tracked eight Chinese military aircraft and seven naval vessels around Taiwan, Taiwan News reported.

The aircraft and vessels were tracked between 6 am (local time) on Thursday and 6 am on Friday. Out of the eight People's Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft, one entered the southwest corner of Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ), according to the MND.

However, no PLA aircraft crossed the Taiwan Strait median line during that time. Taiwan sent aircraft and naval ships and deployed air defence missile systems to monitor the PLA activity.

"8 PLA aircraft and 7 PLAN vessels were detected operating around Taiwan up until 6 a.m. (UTC+8) today. 1 of the aircraft entered Taiwan's southwestern ADIZ.#ROCArmedForces monitored the situation and employed appropriate forces to respond," Taiwan's MND posted on X. According to Taiwan News, Taipei has tracked 116 military aircraft and 72 naval ships from Beijing this year so far. Since September 2020, China has increased its use of grey zone tactics by incrementally increasing the number of military aircraft and naval ships operating around Taiwan. *—ANI*

LANDMARK CHANGE

Greece legalises same-sex marriage

ATHENS, 16 FEB

The Greek parliament passed a law legalizing same-sex marriage making it the first majority Orthodox Christian country to establish marriage equality for all, CNN reported.

The decision hailed as a 'landmark victory' for human rights in Greece, was supported by 176 out of 300 lawmakers in parliament while 76 voted against the change. This follows months of polarised political and public discourse. The change has been welcomed as a long-awaited vindication by the country's LGBTQ+ couples. Taking to X, Greece Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said, "This is a milestone for human rights, reflecting today's Greece - a progressive, and democratic country, passionately committed to European values."

The decision hailed as a 'landmark victory' for human rights in Greece, was supported by 176 out of 300 lawmakers **PHOTO: WE NEWS**

Andrea Gilbert a founding member of Athens Pride, now approaching its 20th year, said, "We started as an invisible, marginalized community. We continued to vote. Paid our taxes. Campaigned. The legislation provides a legal basis to further build on. It is particularly significant for young couples." Notably, parental and children's rights are a cornerstone of the legislation, which will allow same-sex couples to adopt and receive full parental recognition, according to CNN.

Although Greece introduced civil partnerships for gay couples nearly a decade ago under the left-wing Syriza government, only the biological parents of children in those relationships were recognized as legal guardians. Now, same-sex parents can both be recognized as legal parents to their children.

Same-sex couples have also been granted adoption rights in Greece, but can't have a baby through surrogacy. *—ANI*

Rupee rises 4 paise to settle at 83.01 against US dollar

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

The rupee rose 4 paise to settle at 83.01 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday, amid positive sentiment in the domestic equity markets and softening crude oil prices.Forex traders said a strong American currency and outflow of foreign funds, however, capped a sharp gain in the domestic currency.At interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 83.03 and touched the intraday high of 83.00 against the greenback.The local unit finally settled at 83.01 (provisional) against dollar, registering a gain of 4 paise from its previous close.On Thursday, the rupee settled 3 paise lower at 83.05 against the US dollar.Government data released on Thursday showed the country's exports increased 3.12 per cent on-year to USD 36.92 billion in January. Imports rose by about 3 per cent to USD 54.41 billion and the trade deficit stood at USD 17.49 billion.—*PTI*

Gold rises ₹180; silver rallies ₹900

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Gold prices rose Rs 180 to Rs 62,450 per 10 grams in the national capital on Friday amid strong cues in international markets.In the previous trade, the precious metal had closed at Rs 62,270 per 10 grams.Silver also rallied Rs 900 to Rs 75,500 per kilogram, while it had ended at Rs 74,600 per kg in the previous close. In the global markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,003 per ounce, up by USD 10 from the previous close.Silver was also trading higher at USD 22.97 per ounce, while it had finished at USD 22.50 per ounce in the previous trade. Gold prices gained after softer US economic data pushed the dollar and Treasury yields lower.—*PTI*

Akasa Air to start int'l operations from 28 March

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Akasa Air on Friday said it will start international operations with flight services to Doha starting from 28 March."Starting 28 March 2024, Akasa Air will operate four non-stop flights a week, connecting Mumbai with Doha, enhancing air connectivity between Qatar and India," the airline said in a release.Akasa Air Founder and CEO Vinay Dube said its foray into Qatar marks the next phase of growth as it continues the journey towards becoming one of the world's top 30 airlines by the turn of this decade.Currently, the airline, which started flying in August 2022, operates 23 Boeing 737 Max aircraft. —*PTI*

GPT Healthcare's IPO to open on 22 February

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Initial Public Offering (IPO) GPT Healthcare Ltd, which operates and manages mid-sized multi-specialty hospitals under the ILS Hospitals brand, is set to open on February 22. The bidding for anchor investors will open for a day on 21 February, according to Red Herring Prospectus (RHP). IPO is a combination of a fresh issue of equity shares aggregating to Rs 40 crore, and an Offer For Sale (OFS) of up to 2.6 crore equity shares by private equity firm BanyanTree Growth Capital II.BanyanTree, which holds 2.6 crore shares or 32.64 per cent stake in Kolkata-based GPT Healthcare, is divesting its entire shareholding in the company. Its total income increased 7.11 per cent to Rs 366.73 crore in FY23 from Rs 342.40 crore in FY22. The company's net profit declined to Rs 39.01 crore for FY23 from Rs 41.66 crore a year ago. JM Financial is the sole book-running lead manager to the issue. The equity shares are proposed to be listed on the BSE and the NSE. —*PTI*

X ACCUSED OF TAKING PAYMENTS FROM TERRORISTS

X had granted blue check marks to accounts tied to Hezbollah members

SAN FRANCISCO, 16 FEB

Elon Musk's X, formerly Twitter, granted subscription perks to designated terrorist groups and others barred from operating in the US, according to campaigners.

Tech Transparency Project (TTP) found X had granted blue check marks to accounts tied to Hezbollah members, among others.

For $8 a month, a tick allows longer posts and better promotion.

X removed some ticks after the report, saying its security was "robust".

Musk's decision to charge for check marks was one of the most controversial changes he made after he bought Twitter in 2022, with critics saying the move would make issues of disinformation worse, opening the platform to impersonators.

The badge was previously free, meant to indicate that the social media platform had verified the identity behind the account.

Many of the recipients were journalists, as well as world leaders and celebrities.

In some cases, those included people facing sanctions in the US, which opened the company to criticism that it was giving a platform to the wrong people and accusations that it was breaking US sanctions law.

Now that the system is paid, however, "X may be raising new legal issues," the Tech Transparency Project said.

It said X had removed the ticks from the accounts it had identified after its report was published.

TTP said an account run by Ansar Allah, known as the Houthis, had also seemingly paid for its blue check mark. The check mark has now been removed. The account has over 23,000 followers.

The US Treasury, which outlines organisations the US will not trade with, did not immediately respond to a request for comment from the BBC."The US imposes sanctions on individuals, groups, and countries deemed to be a threat to national security. Musk's X appears to be selling premium service to some of them", TTP said.

For $8 a month, a tick allows longer posts PHOTO: X

"A blue checkmark account that bears the name and profile image of Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hezbollah, also indicates it is 'ID verified', a service that X offers to premium subscribers as a way to prevent impersonation. X requires users to submit a government-issued ID and a selfie to get verified in this way, though it is unclear if Nasrallah did so", it added.

Posting on X, the firm's team in charge of safety wrote that its subscription process was "adhering to legal obligations", and was independently screened by X's payment providers.

- Posting on X, the firm's wrote that its subscription process was "adhering to legal obligations", and was independently screened by X's payment providers

"Several of the accounts listed in the Tech Transparency Report are not directly named on sanction lists, while some others may have visible account check marks without receiving any services that would be subject to sanctions", X wrote, adding that the firm would "take action if necessary" after reviewing TTP's report.

The TTP responded to the post saying even though some of the organisations were not named on the US sanctions list, they were owned by entities that are under US sanctions.The director of the TTP Katie Paul told the New York Times that it was a sign that X had "lost control of its platform".The owner of X, Elon Musk - who is also the chief executive of Tesla and one of the world's richest people - has previously said that he wants the social media platform to be like a "town square", advocating the right to free speech, while also removing illegal content.

—*BBC News*

Anti-dumping probe initiated into imports of solar glass

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

India has initiated an anti-dumping probe into imports of certain solar glass from China and Vietnam, following a complaint by domestic players.

The commerce ministry's investigation arm Directorate General of Trade Remedies (DGTR) is probing the alleged dumping of "Textured Tempered Coated and Uncoated Glass' made or from China and Vietnam. The product is also known by various names such as solar glass or solar photovoltaic glass in the market parlance.

An application has been filed by Borosil Renewables Ltd on behalf of the domestic industry for the probe and the imposition of appropriate anti-dumping duty on imports.

DGTR would also recommend the imposition of anti-dumping duty on the imports PHOTO: PTI

"On the basis of the duly substantiated application by the domestic industry, and having satisfied itself, on the basis of prima facie evidence submitted by the applicant substantiating the dumping and consequent injury to the domestic industry, the authority hereby initiates an anti-dumping investigation into the alleged dumping," the notification said.

If it is established that the dumping has caused material injury to domestic players, DGTR would recommend the imposition of anti-dumping duty on the imports.

The finance ministry takes the final decision to impose duties.

—*PTI*

SBI & RBI in talks to lower cash reserve ratio

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

State Bank of India Chairman Dinesh Khara on Friday said the nation's largest lender is in talks with Reserve Bank to reduce the cash reserve ratio requirement on green deposits.

State Bank of India (SBI) last month announced a green deposit scheme, a first in the domestic banking, to attract long-term retail deposits to be used only to fund green transition projects or climate-friendly projects.

The bank said such deposits will be priced 10 basis points lower than normal deposit rates. Cash reserve ratio (CRR) is the minimum amount of cash that a bank needs to keep reserved with the central bank against its total deposit. At present, the CRR is pegged at 4.5 per cent, which means that every one rupee that a bank collects in deposits, 4.5 paise should be parked with the Reserve Bank as a solvency measure. Banks don't earn any interest from the amount reserved with RBI.

"We are engaging with the regulator for a reduction in the CRR for green deposits and secondly, if at all as a policy, it can be incorporated into the regulator policy mechanism. Early beginning has happened from the regulator's side also but maybe it will take two to three years to start having an impact on the pricing too," Khara said at an event organised by the Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode here.

SBI has also started evaluating borrowers on environmental, social and governance rating.

—*PTI*

'India's stand on pharma to boost medicine sector'

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

India's stand on intellectual property rights (IPRs) and pharma issues in proposed trade agreements balances innovation with public health needs, ensures availability of affordable medicines and promotes growth of generic medicine industry, a GTRI report said on Friday.

Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) said that by opposing demands of developed nations on issues like 'data exclusivity' and 'patent linkage' in free trade agreements (FTAs), India ensures that generic drug manufacturers get greater market access and cost of life-saving medicines gets reduced significantly.

It added that this stance reflects a broader effort to protect traditional knowledge and ensure the availability of affordable medicines, addressing significant global challenges in healthcare and IPRs.

The issue assumes significance as developed countries always pressure developing nations like India to take commitments in an FTA on IPR matters over and above agreed under the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) agreement of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

In trade parlance, it is called TRIPs-plus.TRIPs agreements play a crucial role in shaping these rights globally, ensuring fair protection for innovator companies while also allowing for the flourishing of generic drug industries.

When countries sign TRIPs agreements, they commit to modifying their laws related to patent, copyright, trade mark and other relevant laws to align with TRIPs provisions. —*PTI*

Govt starts centralised processing for forms under companies law

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

The government has operationalised the central processing centre for processing filings under the companies law and LLP Act in a "time-bound and faceless manner" as part of efforts to further improve the ease of doing business.

Initially, 12 forms and applications under the companies law will be processed at the Central Processing Centre (CPC). From April 1 onwards, other forms and applications will be processed through the centre.

"As of now, 4,910 forms have been received by CPC after commencing operations. The forms shall be processed a time-bound and faceless manner," the corporate affairs ministry said in a release on Friday.

Later, forms/applications filed under Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) Act are also proposed to be centralised.

Based on filing trends, the ministry said it is expected that about 2.50 lakh forms will be processed through CPC annually, once it is fully operational.

- Initially, 12 forms and applications under the companies law will be processed at the Central Processing Centre (CPC). From April 1 onwards, other forms and applications will be processed through the centre

With the establishment of CPC, the ministry noted that jurisdictional Registrar of Companies (RoC) will have to focus more on their core functions of inquiries, inspection and investigation for ensuring robust corporate governance.

The ministry, which implements the companies and LLP laws, has already operationalised the Central Registration Centre (CRC) and Centralised Processing for Accelerated Corporate Exit (C-PACE).

CRC, C-PACE and CPC will ensure speedy processing of applications and forms filed for incorporation, closure and for meeting regulatory requirements so that the companies are incorporated, closed, can alter and raise capital, and are able to complete their various compliances under the corporate laws with ease, it said.A total of 1,02,063 companies and LLPs were incorporated in FY 2013-14 and the count rose 92 per cent to 1,95,586 in FY 2022-23.

Under C-PACE, applications filed for voluntary closure of companies are getting processed in non-STP (Straight Through Processing) within an average time of less than 4 months (about 100 days) compared to an average time of more than 18 months earlier. —*PTI*

NIFTY CLIMBS 129.95 PTS

Wipro was the biggest gainer in the Sensex chart, rising 4.79 per cent, followed by M&M and L&T PHOTO: PTI

Markets extend winning run to fourth day

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

Equity benchmark indices marched higher for fourth straight session on Friday, with Nifty closing above 22,000 level, tracking gains in index majors L&T, Infosys and M&M, amid a firm trend in the global markets.

The 30-share BSE Sensex surged 376.26 points or 0.52 per cent to close at 72,426.64. The index touched a high of 72,545.33 and a low of 72,218.10 during intraday trade.

The broader NSE Nifty also climbed 129.95 points or 0.59 per cent to end at points 22,040.70.

Wipro was the biggest gainer in the Sensex chart, rising 4.79 per cent, followed by M&M, L&T, Tata Motors, Maruti, Infosys, Nestle India and IndusInd Bank.

Shares of M&M shot up 3.96 per cent to finish at Rs 1,835.55 apiece after it announced its supply agreement with German automotive major Volkswagen Group for electric vehicle components under their joint vision for electric mobility collaboration.

In contrast, PowerGrid, SBI, Reliance, NTPC and Axis Bank were among the laggards.

China's financial markets are closed for the Lunar New Year holidays.

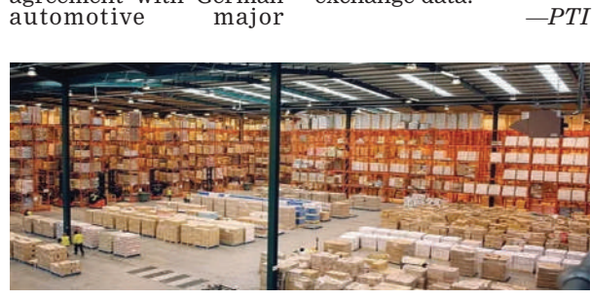
US market closed higher in the overnight trade on Thursday.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude slipped 0.83 per cent to USD 82.17 a barrel.

In the previous session, the 30-share index climbed 227.55 points or 0.32 per cent to close at 72,050.38 points, while NSE Nifty gained 70.70 points or 0.32 per cent to end at 21,910.75.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Thursday as they sold shares worth Rs 3,064.15 crore, according to exchange data.

—*PTI*



The leasing of warehousing and logistics spaces grew 21% to 37.8 million square feet in 2023 PHOTO: PTI

Warehousing demand in B'luru, Chennai down 5%

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Leasing of warehousing spaces in three major southern cities -- Bengaluru, Hyderabad, and Chennai -- fell 5 per cent to 10.2 million square feet during the last year on subdued demand, according to Vestian.

During the 2022 calendar year, the total leasing of warehousing space in these three cities stood at 10.7 million square feet.

Third-party logistics firms, engineering & manufacturing companies, and e-commerce players take warehousing spaces on lease and are major demand drivers.

Real estate consultant Vestian data showed that the share of these three southern cities fell to 27 per cent in 2023 from 34 per cent in the previous year.

Across seven major cities, the leasing of warehousing and logistics spaces grew 21 per cent to 37.8 million square feet in 2023 from 31.2 million square feet in the previous year.

Among cities, the demand in Bengaluru fell to 3.6 million square feet from 4.1 million square feet.

Hyderabad too witnessed a fall at 3.1 million square feet as against 3.7 million square feet in the previous year.

However, the leasing of office space in Chennai grew to 3.5 million square feet from 2.9 million square feet.

In Mumbai, the leasing of warehousing space surged to 10.2 million square feet from 6 million square feet.

The demand in Delhi-NCR increased to 8.8 million square feet from 7.3 million square feet.

In Pune, the leasing of warehousing space rose to 7 million square feet from 5.2 million square feet.

Vestian attributed the growth in Pune to the presence of a trade hub of Chakan MIDC, which hosts large manufacturing and logistics parks.

Vestian is one of the leading real estate consultants in the world. In India, it is headquartered in Bengaluru and has a presence in major cities.

—*PTI*

POST DEBACLE

Toll collector removes Paytm from list of banks issuing FASTag

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Indian Highways Management Company Ltd (IHMCL), toll collecting arm of state-owned NHAI, has advised highway users to buy FASTags from 32 authorised banks sans Paytm Payments Bank for hassle-free travel.

In a post on X, IHMCL said for hassle-free travel, buy your FASTag from 32 authorised banks.

The 32 authorised banks include Airtel Payments Bank, Allahabad Bank, Bank of Baroda, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, IDBI Bank, Punjab National Bank, State Bank of India, and Yes Bank, among others.

A senior NHAI official told PTI that India has over 8 crore FASTag users and Paytm Payments Bank (PPBL) has around 30 per cent market share.

Earlier, IHMCL in a letter dated January 19, 2024 had barred Paytm Payments Bank from issuing fresh FASTags.

On 31 January, Reserve Bank directed Paytm Payments Bank (PPBL) to stop accepting deposits or top-ups in any customer accounts, wallets, FASTTags and other instruments after 29 February.

Earlier, IHMCL in a letter dated 19 January, 2024, had barred PPBL from issuing fresh FASTags PHOTO: ANI

However, any interest, cashbacks, or refunds may be credited back to customers anytime.

Further, withdrawal or utilisation of balances by its customers from their accounts, including savings bank accounts, current accounts, prepaid instruments, FASTags, and National Common Mobility Cards are to be permitted without any restrictions, up to their available balance.

- IHMCL has said it is encouraging FASTag users to complete the 'Know Your Customer' (KYC) process of their latestFASTag as per RBI guidelines

"No other banking services, other than those ... like fund transfers (irrespective of name and nature of services like AEPS, IMPS, etc), BBPOU and UPI facility should be provided by the bank after 29 February, 2024," it added.

The direction followed persistent non-compliances and continued material supervisory concerns, the central bank had said in a statement.

IHMCL has said it is encouraging FASTag users to complete the 'Know Your Customer' (KYC) process of their latestFASTag as per RBI guidelines.

The banks authorised for issuing FASTags also include Union Bank of India, Thrissur District Cooperative Bank, South Indian Bank, Saraswat Bank, Nagpur NagrikSahkari Bank, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Karur Vyasya Bank, J&K Bank, IndusInd Bank, Indian Bank, IDFC First Bank, FINO Bank, Equitable Small Finance Bank, Cosmos Bank, City Union Bank Ltd, Central Bank of India, Canara Bank, Bank of Maharashtra, AU Small Finance Bank, and Axis Bank.

—*PTI*

Duckett's hundred puts India under pressure

Ashwin becomes second Indian bowler to pick 500 Test wickets

RAJKOT, 16 FEB

Ben Duckett's power-packed hundred overshadowed R Ashwin's monumental feat as England thrived on their belligerent Bazball tactic to reach 207/2 at stumps on day two and put India under pressure in the third Test here on Friday.

Ashwin dismissed Zak Crawley (15) in the final session to join Anil Kumble as the second Indian, and fifth overall, to take 500 wickets in Test history.

But India's struggles to contain England's fearless and enterprising batters persisted as Duckett raced to his third Test hundred off only 88 balls.

England have already wiped off a chunk of their first-innings deficit and trail India by 238 runs going into day three. India ended up with 445 in their first innings. At one stage, Duckett even flirted briefly with the prospect of breaking Gilbert Jessop's record from 1902 for the fastest Test ton (77 balls) for his country.

Ben Duckett **PHOTO: PTI**

Duckett peppered the field with powerful strokes all around the ground, hitting 21 fours and two sixes to reach 133 not out from only 118 balls. Joe Root was at the other end on nine.

Ashwin struck immediately after his introduction into the attack to send Crawley packing, with the batter gift-wrapping his wicket to help the Indian spinner complete his milestone. On an innocuous delivery from around the wicket, Crawley managed a connection that ballooned towards Rajat Patidar at short fine leg.

In the oriental land of spin, with its legacy furtherembellished through the famous quartet led by Bishan Singh Bedi, the slow-art'sconveyor belt had additional luminaries like Anil Kumble and Harbhajan Singh.Among these Indian stalwarts of guile and the wicked grin, R. Ashwin has carvedhis unique niche, and 'Mount 500' in Tests is the latest milestone to greet theoff-spinner. Dismissing England opener Zak Crawley to register his 500th wicket during the 3rd Test at Rajkot. *—PTI*

R. Ashwin **PHOTO: PTI**

KANE LEADS THE WAY AS NZ BEAT SOUTH AFRICA BY 7 WKTS IN 2ND TEST

HAMILTON, 16 FEB

Kane Williamson made 133 in an unbroken partnership of 152 with Will Young to lead New Zealand to a seven-wicket win over South Africa on the fourth day of the second test Friday and its first-ever series win over the Proteas.

Williamson scored centuries in both innings of the first test which New Zealand won by 281 runs.South Africa took a 31-run first-innings lead in the second test and extended that to 267 when it made 235 in its second innings.New Zealand reached 40-1 before stumps on day three, setting up a fourth day on which it needed a further 227 while South Africa needed nine wickets to win the match and save the series.New Zealand's total of 269-3 was its fifth-highest in a successful fourth-innings run chase.The South African team is considerably under-strength as most of its leading players remained at home to play in a domestic Twenty20 league. Six Proteas players including captain Neil Brand made their debuts in the first test and the second test lineup had only 51 tests in total compared to New Zealand's 436.The South African bowlers made New Zealand grind its way to victory. The winning runs finally came in the 95th over, about 20 minutes before the end of play on day four.Williamson's played almost a lone hand at first as he built his 32nd test century from 203 deliveries. He put on 64 for the third wicket with Rachin Ravindra who made 20 from 72 balls.He then found a resolute partner in Young who stayed with him and was 60 not out at the close.New Zealand was under pressure when Young came out to join Williamson at the fall of Ravindra's wicket, still needing 150 to win. New Zealand 211 (Williamson 43, Piedt 5-89) and 269 for 3 (Williamson 133*, Young 60*, Piedt 3-93) beat South Africa 242 (de Swardt 64, O'Rourke 4-59) and 235 (Bedingham 110, O'Rourke 5-34) by seven wickets. *—AP*

PHOTO: PTI

Ishan's absence from Ranji Trophy continues

JAMSHEDPUR, 16 FEB

Ishan Kishan's absence from the Ranji Trophy continued as the wicketkeeper-batter, who plays domestic cricket for Jharkhand, skipped the final round of matches that started on Friday, a move that will not go down well with BCCI.Kishan's reluctance to play first-class cricket and focus only on the IPL forced the BCCI to make a minimum number of Ranji Trophy games mandatory for players to be eligible for the cash-rich league's lucrative auction pool.Deepak Chahar and Shreyas Iyer are also missing in action in the ongoing final round of matches that started across venues.*—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Ghosal reaches QF of Squash Fire Open

WASHINGTON, 16 FEB

Saurav Ghosal moved into the quarterfinals of the Squash Fire Open with a hard-fought 4-11, 11-8, 11-4, 13-11 win over Spencer Lovejoy (US) in a match that stretched to almost an hour. The Indian world No. 26, who is the sixth seed and received a first-round bye at the $51,500 PSA World Tour Bronze event, will meet French world No. 11 and top seed Victor Crouin in the quarterfinals.

Meanwhile, reigning national champion Velavan, who made it to his maiden PSA World Tour Silver quarterfinal in Pittsburgh last week, lost to Egyptian second seed Youssef Soliman 11-6, 11-8, 11-2.*—AP*

Manu Bhaker wins bronze in 10m air pistol event

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Ace Indian shooter Manu Bhaker on Friday bagged a bronze medal in the women's 10m air pistol event in the ISSF World Cup 10m in Grenada, Spain.Bhaker shot a total of 215.1 to finish third in the women's 10m air pistol final.

Bres Klaudia (236.2) of Poland and Ibarra Miranda Andrea Victoria (236.2) of Mexico won the gold and silver respectively.Another Indian Rhythm Sangwan finished last in the eight-woman final.A 34-member Indian contingent is taking part in the World Cup which is having junior and senior 10m air gun competitions only.The senior competitions began on Friday.India has so far won 4 gold, 3 silver, and 3 bronze in the competition.*—PTI*

Men's FIH: India beat Ireland 1-0

BHUBANESWAR,16 FEB

A lackluster India survived a mighty scare but eventually beat lower-ranked Ireland 1-0 through a Gurjant Singh strike in the final minute of their FIH Pro League match here on Friday.

Ireland frustrated the Indians for most of the match with resolute defending but Gurjant saved the blushes for the home side as his powerful shot from the top of the striking circle in the 60th minute beat the Irish goalkeeper.

India also failed to convert any of their six penalty corners. Ireland, who are ranked 11th against fourth of India, got three PCs.

It was The Indians who had a sloppy start and lacked the same level of energy that they showed in Thursday's 10-goal thriller against Australia.

Ireland, on the other hand, had more ball possession and was successful in cutting off Indian balls inside their circle.

India had the first real chance in the form of a penalty corner but captain Harmanpreet Singh's flick was saved in the goal-line by an alert Irish defender. *—PTI*

Baba's unbeaten 122 takes TN to 291/4 on the first day against Punjab

SALEM, 16 FEB

Baba Indrajith struck an unbeaten 122 and shared an unbroken 184-run partnership with Vijay Shankar as hosts Tamil Nadu reached 291 for 4 against Punjab on the opening day of their Ranji Trophy Group C match here on Friday.

After electing to bat, TN was reduced to 64 for 3 and then 107 for 4 before Indrajith and Shankar revived their innings. The duo batted for 53.3 overs without separation.

At stumps on the opening day, Shankar, who came at No. 6, was batting on 85 with the help of six boundaries.

Coming to bat at No. 4, Indrajith was much quicker as his 122 not out came from 181 deliveries and was studded with six boundaries.

Baba Indrajith **PHOTO: PTI**

Other Tamil Nadu batters did not make much of an impact.

For Karnataka, Sukhwinder Singh took two wickets for 61 runs while Siddarth Kaul and Abhishek Sharma got one each.

In Porvorim, Goa reached 309 for 9 in 83 overs on the opening day after being invited to bat, riding on half-centuries from Darshan Misal (88) and (Mohit Redkar 80). Arjun Tendulkar contributed 45 off 70 balls.

For Gujarat, Siddharth Desai, Chintan Gaja, and Priyajitsing Jadeja grabbed two wickets apiece while Ravi Bishnoi and Arzan Nagwaswalla took one each.

Brief Scores:

In Salem: Tamil Nadu 291 for 4 from 90 overs (Baba Indrajith 122 batting, Vijay Shankar 85 batting; Sukhwinder Singh 2/61) vs Punjab.

In Porvorim: Goa 309 for 9 in 83 overs (Darshan Misal 88, Mohit Redkar 80, Arjun Tendulkar 45; Siddharth Desai 2/47) vs Gujarat.

In Hubballi: Chandigarh 219 for 6 in 89 overs (Karan Kaila 79; Vijaykumar Vyshak 2/48, Hardik Raj 2/54) vs Karnataka. *—PTI*

I will personally invite wrestlers for trials: Sanjay Singh

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

WFI President Sanjay Singh on Friday assured that the protesting wrestlers' trio of Bajrang Punia, Vinesh Phogat and Sakshi Malik would not face any discrimination and he would personally approach them for appearance in the Olympic Qualifiers trials, which will be held in Maharashtra.

World governing body UWW had lifted the provisional suspension imposed on the WFI with a rider that no wrestler should face discrimination.

Punia, Phogat and Malik had led a protest against former WFI President Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, who they have accused of sexual exploitation of women wrestlers. *—PTI*

Conditions will be key to retaining WPL title: Harmanpreet

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

Mumbai Indians skipper Harmanpreet Kaur feels adapting to different conditions will be vital to defending the title in the upcoming Women's Premier League, which is scheduled to be played in Bengaluru and New Delhi from 23 February to 17 March.

The inaugural edition last year was played in Mumbai and the hosts rode on familiar conditions and crowd support to clinch the title under Harmanpreet's leadership. "The conditions in Bengaluru will be different than in Mumbai. I don't have much experience of playing in Delhi, so I don't have any idea how the wickets will fare in Delhi," Harmanpreet told PTI TV on the sidelines of WPL's pre-season media conference.

"If we can just quickly adapt to these things, this will show how good we are as a team. These are the areas we have to keep in mind and accordingly change our game plan."

Harmanpreet Kaur **PHOTO: PTI**

The skipper said that though MI had a strong squad, the call on the playing eleven for a particular match would be taken based on conditions. "It is important for any team to have as many good players in the team as possible because then you can pick the best eleven. There is also competition for places among players.

"We will make our playing eleven according to conditions. Now our role is to read the conditions well and then take a call on the team," Harmanpreet said.

They might not be enjoying the home support this year, but MI hopes to replicate their last season's performance.

"Improvement is an important part of our lives, every day we have to keep improving, adding new things in our game as well as in the team. Our players have done well in the last season. It was a complete team performance, we were not dependent on one or two players," Harmanpreet said.

"This year our goal will be the same and try to add some good things and play according to situations."

Besides captaincy, she is also looking to contribute with the bat at the crucial No.4 position.

"My contribution in batting will be very important because the entire team plays around the position I bat. It will be important for me to read the situations and bat accordingly," Harmanpreet said.

She also hopes the upcoming edition will give some new talent. *—PTI*

SECOND CHANCE

Real Madrid free to make another run for Mbappé

MADRID, 16 FEB

Real Madrid and Kylian Mbappé may get a second chance to make it work.

Less than two years after what seemed to be a done deal fell apart, the Spanish powerhouse and the France star could have another opportunity to join forces.

Mbappé reportedly told Paris Saint-Germain on Thursday that he will leave the club at the end of the season, opening the way for another run by Madrid to sign one of the world's best soccer players.

There could be a bidding war among several clubs to sign the former World Cup winner, but Madrid is widely considered to be in the front seat.

Mbappé's arrival would give Madrid one of the top attacks in soccer, with Mbappé joining Jude Bellingham, Vinícius Júnior and Rodrygo.

It would also give Europe's most successful club a great outlook for the future, as Mbappé would be the oldest of the four at just 25 years old.

Madrid made a big push to sign Mbappé in 2022, with one of its offers rejected by PSG reportedly reaching 200 million euros ($215 million).

Mbappé never hid his dream of one day playing for Madrid but decided at the time that it was best to continue his "adventure" in Paris.It would be a much cheaper deal for Madrid now, as Mbappé will be a free agent after seven years with PSG. He informed the French club last year that he would not trigger an extension to the contract he signed in 2022. *—AP*